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AS THE HILL VAGRANT BEHELD PAUL'S RICH FIND, A LOOK OF EXULTATION CAME INTO HIS LITTLE WOLFISH EYES.

OR,
The Deadwood Desperado's
Last Innings.

BY JOHN W. OSBON,
AUTHOR OF "THE RIVAL GIANTS OF NOWHAR,"
"ROYAL RICHARD," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

"GOLD - A POCKET!"

EARLY in the afternoon of a day in mid-spring, some years ago, a man and a boy were walking slowly along, one on each side of a small water-course in the heart of the Black Hills region.

Both were well-armed, and each carried a prospector's kit.

The man was a tall, gaunt, loose-jointed, red-

bearded fellow, not far from the age of forty years.

His clothing, tattered and earth-stained, hung loosely upon him, and as his face and hands were grimed and dirty, his hair and beard matted and unkempt, he presented anything but a neat appearance.

As to the boy, he was a spry, solidly-built, well-developed lad, apparently not older than seventeen, and a thoroughbred frontier nomad. His hands, face and clothing were in a condition quite as deplorable as his companion's; and yet, despite his uncouth, slovenly appearance, there was something bright and attractive about him.

"Wal, Paul, we may es wal hold up an' rest a bit," the man remarked, halting at the end of a flat-topped bowlder beside the little stream, and throwing down his pick and shovel. "Another day purty nigh gone, an' not a flake o' dust ter show fer it!"

"We might try ter turn up somethin'," Paul suggested, halting on the opposite bank of the stream, and eying his surroundings suspiciously. "Biggest part o' the afternoon's ahead ov us yit, Uncle Bill, an' ef thar's no gold on this hyar branch, w'y thar's none in ther Black Hills—thet's all!"

"Mebbe; but don't ye try ter catterkize me, Paul Park, ye shiftless critter!" growled he of the red beard, producing and filling a short black pipe. "I've bin in this hyar world long enuff ter know es how ther slow har's generally travels furdest."

"But dig, ef ye want to. Keep w'ot ye find, an' I'll do ther same."

"All right, Uncle Bill," was the cheery response, and whistling softly the young prospector strolled on up the stream.

Reclining lazily upon the bowlder, Uncle Bill followed the lad with his furtive, bloodshot black eyes.

"Peck away, my fine feller!" he muttered, showing his discolored teeth in an evil smile. "You'll fetch me big money one o' these days—an' it won't be with pick or shovel either, sure's I'm Old Bill Blaze!"

"Lordy!" he continued, after a moment, as he exhaled a dense cloud of smoke; "how long ago it seems! Le' me see—fourteen years, ef a day, I reckon. Thet's a long time ter wait, an' keep shady, but sumbody has got ter kem down soon, an' harnsomenly, too, fer ther man w'ot pays ther biggest wins!"

"Basil Bawn's in Deadwood, so Kernel Jim must still live; an' livin', he'd orter 'a' got my letter ten days ago. Et's his own loss ef he didn't—an' ther kid's; fer ef ther kernel don't tarn up, Bawn'll buy my secret, an' pay fer et, too! But I'd a leetle ruther do ther bizness with ther kernel, fer Bawn's a hard nut ter hull—a feeklish critter ter han'le."

Then the half-audible strains, hinting so broadly at a transaction of a dark and villainous nature, suddenly ceased. Bill Blaze knocked the ashes from his pipe, and stealthily gained his feet.

Paul Park had ascended the stream a hundred yards, and was busily at work with pick and shovel. He had been under constant surveillance, and something in his actions had at last aroused the suspicions of his shiftless guardian.

"Thet kid's turned up sumthin'," muttered Blaze, a greedy glitter showing in his little eyes, as he narrowly watched the lad for a moment after descending from the bowlder.

Stealthily crossing the shallow stream, he stole along the bank as silently as ever panther crept upon its prey, and undetected reached a spot within a few paces of the boy prospector.

It was a tempting sight that met his gaze.

Paul was upon his knees, absorbed in the task of "washing over" a mass of coarse gravel and earth he had turned up from the bottom of a basin worn years before by water falling from the rocks above.

Beside him was spread his handkerchief, and upon it lay upwards of a score of nuggets, ranging from a pea to a walnut in size.

As the hill vagrant beheld Paul's rich find a look of exultation came into his little wolfish eyes.

"Gold—a pocket!" he exclaimed, eagerly springing forward. "Pard Paul, we're in luck!"

"I am," steadily returned Paul, without lifting his flushed face, and then, as he finished the last handful of earth, he threw another golden pebble into the pile.

"Which means yer Uncle Bill, too!"

"Nary!"

"What! Ain't we parads?"

"Cain't say thet we aire, Uncle Bill."

"Huh! I'd like ter know ef we ain't!" cried Blaze, his face assuming a purplish hue as his *protege* carefully knotted the handkerchief.

"Thet war ther 'greement, an' I reckon ye'll hev ter stick by it. Wa'n't et, now?" and his sharp tones grew wheedling.

"'Twas onc't," Paul admitted, tucking his treasure into his pocket; "but ye must recom-member, Uncle Bill, es how ye bu'sted ther combination a bit ago. Ef ye'd bin up an' stirrin' when I turned up ther pebbles, hafe w'u'd 'a' bin yourn; but ye wa'n't, an' so et's all mine—an' I kalkilate ter keep et!"

Old Blaze protested against this decision, earnestly but vainly, blustering and wheedling, threatening and cajoling, by turns. The lad was as unyielding as adamant; experience had taught him a lesson by which he was determined to profit.

"Thar's plenty o' gold in these hills, Uncle Bill—heaps an' heaps ov it," he said, when Blaze, finding himself baffled, turned sullenly away. "Dig, an' I'm with ye. Thar's metal above sumwhar, an' thet very dry channel may be lined with et. These nuggets war brought down et by a freshet, most likely."

"Anyway, ther lead is a good one, an' is mine as matters stand; but, ef ye want a chaine at et, I'll make et hafe an' hafe, with equal time."

Old Blaze promptly declined the offer.

"W'ot ye take me fer?" he sneered. "Ye've bu'sted ther pardnership, an' et kin stay bu'sted. Nary a prospect fer me. I'm makin' a bee-line fer Deadwood at daybreak!"

"All right, Uncle Bill; reckon I kin work et on my own hook," said Paul quietly, and then the two returned to the vicinity of the bowlder.

"Boy," broke forth the old prospector, after a moment of silence; "boy, ye're a durned fool! Ye'll lose yer ha'r—sure! Ther hull kentry's jest bloomin' with red-skins!"

Paul nodded nonchalantly, saying: "Know em like a book, Uncle Bill! Don't worry 'bout me, nor hang back on my 'count ef ye feel like breakin' fer Deadwood! Jest trot! I'll git along somehow."

Old Blaze, extending his hand, threw back his head and uttered a hoarse, chuckling laugh.

"Ho! ho! ho!" he roared. "Put it thar, kid! Reckon ye don't know me! Bill Blaze ain't ther man ter go back on a pard that-a-way!"

But Paul drew back and declined the proffered hand.

"I know ye too well, Uncle Bill!" he declared, his blue eyes glowing resolutely. "Ye won't do ter tie to, fer ye can't be trusted. Look how ye fooled away the Chucapin Mine. Mebbe—"

Stealthy steps interrupted the lad. Dropping his kit, he wheeled about, revolver in hand.

A man, evidently a prospector, was approaching from the direction of the pocket.

"Hallo! hallo!" he hailed, halting in feigned surprise, as he noted Paul's action. "Beg pardon, gents—didn't intend ter intrude!"

"Come on!" called Blaze, and Paul lowered his hand, whereupon the stranger advanced.

He was a powerful-looking fellow—short and thick-set, with a wonderful depth of chest and breadth of shoulder. His closely-cropped beard hid his face almost to his eyes, and, like his short, bristling hair, was of a dirty straw-color. He carried a prospector's outfit, and in his belt hung a brace of big revolvers and a monstrous bowie—a veritable Southern trail-cutter.

No sooner had Paul obtained a good square look at the stranger, than he became conscious of a feeling of strong aversion and distrust. There was something in the fellow's protuberant, greenish-blue eyes hinting at a broad capacity for villainy.

"I'm glad ter see ye, parads—I am, fer a mortal fack!" he asseverated, as he came within easy speaking-distance. "These hyar derved hills is es full ov Injuns es a dog's pelt o' fleas—don't ye fergit et!"

"Injuns?" ejaculated Old Blaze, starting sharply, and then eying the fellow with intense interest. "Stranger, yer han'le?"

"Solid Sammy, boss; an' yourn?"

"Old Bill Blaze. This kid's my neph'y, Plucky Paul."

"Ay, an' plucky he is, too," observed Sammy, turning to the young prospector. "I kin see it in 'im."

Paul merely nodded. The bit of flattery did not tend to alter his final impression of the bully prospector. Then, too, the keen-eyed boy had detected an exchange of signals between the two men, and he felt assured that they were old acquaintances.

Why, then, the farce of exchanging names? "Sumthin' dark back ov it," Paul could not help thinking, and he determined to keep his eyes and ears open while in their company.

"But these red-rinds," Old Blaze exclaimed, scowling at the attention bestowed upon Paul; "whar aire they, Sammy?"

"Thar's a big passle ov 'em not more'n a mile up ther branch," was the prompt reply. "I was about ter suggest, Blaze, thet ef you fellers hev a hang-out near, we'd better git under kiver. 'Twixt ther red-skins an' Captain Panther-Head thar's apt ter be ther fiend ter pay in these hills in ther naixt few days."

"Captain Panther-Head!"

"Jes' so, Blaze; ther shaggy cuss hes flushed on every trail leadin' out o' Deadwood in ther past two weeks, an' filled ev'ry time."

"But le's git under kiver, parads. Thar's danger ov inhalin' a scalpin-knife or a tomahawk ev'ry minnit we stand hyar."

"We've a shanty a couple miles below," vouchsafed Blaze, dubiously. "It's a rickety affair—not bullet-proof."

"Et's ther best we kin do," Solid Sammy asserted, and then they started forward, Paul keeping slightly in the rear.

The cabin was soon reached. It was a frail structure, located in a secluded nook in the side of a deep and narrow gorge, and stood with its back against the foot of an overhanging cliff.

"Thar she be," announced Old Blaze, with a wave of his hand, as they entered the nook. "Not ez harnsum, mebb'y, es sum in Deadwood, but ov antick design, an' es snug es a bug in a rug."

"We don't keep our critters hyar, but they're in easy reach, and I kalkilate we're purty well fixed, barrin' a flood."

"But walk in, Solid Sammy, an' purceed ter make yerself at home. We kin talk over matters inside es well es out, an' not hafe ther risk ov a fangin' frum sum loafin red-rind."

"That's es straight es a string," Sammy assented, grinning broadly. "But ef ther red cusses strike our trail, they'll walk right in on us, with never an invite!"

"Now, 'cordin' ter my idea ov sech things, ther kerrect way ter do is ter put a sentry out in ther gorge, an' then sail in an' slap things inter ship-shape in a jiffy. Then, when ther reds begin ter crowd, we kin jest onlimber an' clean them right out ov their moccasins—darn their pelts!"

"Yas, yas; ye've got ther wrinkle down fine!" cried Blaze, with a vehement nod.

"Paul, sp'ose ye slip down ther gorge a leetle ways an' keep yer eyes peeled. Ye're purty spry, an' I reckon et'd take consid'able Injun—"

The Boy Prospector did not wait for the remainder of the eulogistic strain. Throwing aside his kit, he turned and strode quickly out of the nook.

"Thet settles him till we've a mind ter call 'im in," laughed Solid Sammy, as Paul disappeared. "Pluck—he's chockful ov et, an' es vain es a peacock!"

"But w'at ye bin doin' since thet Virginia City job, Fur—"

"No names, Cre—"

"Solid Sammy, please," interrupted the dwarfed desperado, in turn, and then the two shook hands.

"Let's don't fergit ag'in—thar's a heap in a name sum'times," said Blaze, leading the way into the hovel and producing a bottle.

"Drink, ole pard, an' then onloard yer mind. I kin see thar's a weight on et!"

Solid Sammy needed no second invitation. Nodding, he threw back his head, elevated the demijohn, and poured a liberal sample of its contents down his throat.

"Ah-h! thet's milk-an'-honey fer ye!" he gurgled, with a sigh of contentment, as he returned the bottle of distilled fire to his whilom pard and squatted on a chunk of wood serving as a seat.

"Now fer bizness, Billy!"

"Thet's me, pard," grunted Old Blaze, putting aside the demijohn and taking his pipe from his pocket. "Fire away."

Sammy glanced suspiciously at the walls of the hovel.

"Kin that kid be trusted ter tend ter his own bizness?"

"Yas, yas; he'll stay right in the pass till called—or ther reds come."

"Reds—fiddlesticks!" remarked Sammy, with a grin. "They'll wait till I git back 'fore they make a move—mind thet!"

Old Blaze turned pale. His mouth opened and his pipe fell unheeded to the floor.

"You aire—"

"White Wolf, the Decoy!" coolly anticipated Sammy. "Now lis'en."

"I need help, an' ye're ther very man I want. Et's big pay an' leetle work. What say?"

The red-bearded desperado picked up his pipe. His hand shook as if palsy-stricken.

"Tell me w'ot I'm ter do," he muttered casting a half-fearful glance at his *vis-a-vis*.

"Help me smuggle a gal away from her friends."

"What'll ye give?"

"Fifty dollars."

"I'm yer mustang!" cried Blaze, slapping his thigh. "Go ahead and explain yer riddle, an' ef my hand hain't lost ets cunning I'll win ther trick!"

"Good! that's the talk!" Solid Sammy exclaimed approvingly, his cruel eyes glittering with triumph. "Now, Billy, I'll give ye ther ins an' outs ov ther job, an' mum's ther word!"

"Down in Deadwood two days ago, ther Honorable Madison Morrell run—"

"Madison Morrell!" ejaculated Blaze, in renewed astonishment.

"Yas, that's wot! D'ye know 'im?"

"I've hured ther name. But go on," was the evasive reply.

"Wal, es I said, I ran acrost Morrell," resumed the Decoy, fixing his eyes searchingly on his ally's face, "an' he took me inter his confidence."

"Fer two weeks past, a party ov Eastern folks, out on a lark, hev bin camped in ther hills not many miles from hyar, an' among 'em is a gal—a reg'lar slasher fer looks an' style, an' wuth a heap ov rocks—an'—an'—"

"An' Madison falls in love with her?" suggested Blaze, with a peculiar grin, as Solid Sammy hesitated.

"Jes' so, an' at fu'st sight," the Decoy admitted, "an' es thar's no fool like an ole fool, so'z he's jest clean gone, with no show at all, es ther gal's lover, a feller from Denver, is with ther outfit."

"But ther ole man isn't one o' ther kind ter die easy. He's figgered et out es how all's fair in love an' war, or sumthin' o' thet sort, an' decided ter try his hand at a brace game. So he offered me a hundred dollars ter kidnap an' take ther gal ter a sart'in place, within a sart'in time, an' I took him up, agreein' ther reds sh'ud hev no part in ther affair."

"An' thar's whar I'm stuck! Ther time's up! I can't han'le ther job alone. I need a pard, an' ye're ther har'pin."

Old Blaze nodded his acquiescence and passed the bottle.

"Thar's another p'int, Billy, thet I'm goin' ter post ye up on," averred the Decoy, when he had wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "You're lettin' thet kid git ther bit between his teeth."

"I saw him open thet pocket a bit ago, an' I hured all that passed betwixt ye, an' I mus' say, ye let 'im hoodwink ye awdashusly!"

"Don't be too sure o' thet," Blaze retorted, with a cunning leer. "I kalkilate ter hev 'kerchief, pebbles an' all before mornin'!"

Solid Sammy uttered a sneering laugh.

"Will ye take 'em fer yer sheer?" he asked, suddenly leaning forward, his evil eyes filling with a greedy glow. "Ther pebbles in ther 'kerchief?"

"Eh?"

"Whack up, hafe an' hafe, an' I'll tell ye w'ot ye don't know!"

"I'll do et, Sammy!"

"Wal, then, ther nuggets in ther 'kerchief warn't all nor a third o' what kem out o' thet pocket!" asseverated the Decoy, speaking in a low intense voice and glancing warily at the walls as he uttered the words. "Ther very fu'st thing Plucky Paul tared up war *two lumps o' gold, neither smaller'n thet mauller!*"

And the desperado raised and displayed his huge fist.

"Git out!" gasped Blaze, incredulously.

"Oh, et's a mortal fact!" the Decoy declared. "An' es ther critter's a-keepin' so quiet, I reckon et w'udn't be a bad idear ter take a squint down ther gorge. He's no fool, an' a s'picion thet all's not ezackly right may 'a' crept inter his noddle."

The two ruffians hurriedly left the hovel.

Plucky Paul was not in sight, and a hasty search of the vicinity disclosed the fact that he had secured his kit and taken his departure!

The desperadoes stood aghast.

Their prey had slipped them!

"He's gone, and ther gold with him!" Blaze declared, hoarsely.

"Cuss him! he shan't escape!" savagely vowed the Decoy. "Stir yerself, pard! Thet treasure must be ourn afore we sleep!"

CHAPTER II.

A FLIGHT AND AN AMBUSCADE.

THE unscrupulous schemers had woefully deceived themselves as to their intended victim.

From the moment of the Decoy's appearance and the adroit exchange of signals, Paul had been suspicious and watchful, feeling assured

that the two men were old acquaintances, if not actually allies.

Why, then, the pretense of being strangers?

The reason was obvious!

"Solid Sammy, from some secure covert near at hand, had witnessed the opening of the pocket, and probably knew to a nicety the quantity of gold it had yielded; had overheard the conversation with Billy Blaze, and knowing the character of the old prospector, had determined to join him, to the end that a dark scheme might be concocted to secure the treasure."

So, during the hurried and careless retreat to the hovel in the gorge, the Boy Prospector was extremely wide awake, keeping just far enough in the rear to hear and weigh well every word that passed between the two men, and to make the best possible use of his keen blue eyes.

His vigilance was well repaid.

Long ere the shanty was reached, the shrewd lad had heard and seen enough to confirm his worst suspicions, and he determined to quit the company of the two men at the earliest moment possible.

With the request that he stand guard in the lower gorge came his coveted opportunity.

No sooner were Old Blaze and the Decoy fairly in the hovel, than Paul appeared from around the angle. Silently securing his kit, he turned and stole down the gorge, without so much as a backward glance.

"No need ter look out fer red-skins," he muttered, a peculiar flash lighting up his blue eyes. "Et's my opinion Solid Sammy lied! He's no better than Uncle Bill; an' I reckon thet don't say much fer his repertashun!"

"Wal, I'm on my own hook ag'in—an' I'm glad ov et! No pards ov ther Uncle Bill stripe—not any! Bin wictimized enuff, fer a spring chicken, an' I don't go back 'thout a fight! Course they'll be arter me—hot-foot! A hunk or two ov gold hes a mighty drawin' power—long es sum other feller hes et."

Two or three hundred yards below the nook, Paul quickened his pace to a steady trot, and in a few minutes arrived at a gap in the south wall of the gorge, where he halted.

Across the mouth of the opening were three ropes, and as the boy lowered the heavy strands he uttered a peculiar whistle.

"That'll fetch Firefly," he observed, in a half-audible tone, as he darted into the opening. "I'll get my traps, an' then good-by ter Uncle Bill an' his measly pard!"

Ere the Boy Prospector had ceased speaking, he entered a deep alcove in one of the walls, where he pulled down a flat stone concealing the entrance to a small cave.

From this cavity he took a splendid Mexican saddle, a bridle, a lariat, a repeating-rifle, and a bulky package wrapped in waterproof cloth, and then replaced the stone.

Scarcely had his preparations in this line been completed when, with a whinny of welcome, a handsome black filly appeared at the entrance to the pocket.

"Ho! Firefly! ye're on time, as ever!" cried Paul, his eyes flashing with pride and delight as he turned to the beautiful animal. "Steady, gal! an' we'll git away from hyar at a lively rate!"

The lad worked with the skill of an expert, and in a moment's time was ready for a continuance of his flight.

Thrusting his prospecting tools into an obscure cleft in the rocks, he walked down into the gorge, closely followed by Firefly. A glance in the direction of the hovel showed no signs of pursuit. Carefully replacing the barrier of ropes, he mounted and rode away.

About three miles below the hovel, the gorge entered a narrow valley leading away to the southwest. After just a trace of deliberation, Paul turned up the valley, and urged the filly into a steady lope.

An hour later, just as twilight deepened, he halted for the night. Dismounting, he stripped the trappings from Firefly and turned her loose, with full confidence that when wanted the noble little filly would be at hand.

The spot selected for a camp was a secluded one, upon the borders of a small stream. Without loss of time Paul proceeded to make himself as comfortable as possible, disposing of his saddle and other effects in an orderly manner.

With the first gleam of day the lad was astir. After a thorough bath in a pool near at hand, he opened the package and arrayed himself in its contents, and the change thus wrought in his appearance was most marvelous.

The vagabond was no longer visible. In his stead stood a handsome, gallant-looking young frontiersman, with flashing blue eyes, bronzed

face, and long, wavy brown hair; a dandified fellow, too, with great white sombrero, white flannel shirt, corded with silk, dark velveteen jacket, broad leathern girdle, buckskin leggins ornate with beads and quills, and high-topped, patent-leather boots.

But the resolute expression of the clear-cut face, robbed it of even a suspicion of effeminacy, dandified as the young prospector might be in appearance. It was from his enemies the lad had first won the sobriquet of Plucky Paul, and that it was not a misnomer events were yet to prove.

When the transformation had been completed to the smallest detail, Paul threw aside his cast-off clothing, summoned Firefly with a whistle, and a few minutes later rode on up the valley.

"Foot-loose at last!" he muttered, without a trace of exultation. "The coming of Solid Sammy forced me to take the decisive step sooner than I intended; but I have not seen the last of Uncle Bill, and the time will yet come when I shall know his secret, and solve the mystery surrounding me."

"Now for Deadwood! I must convert these nuggets into cash without delay—provided I can elude the rapacious Captain Panther-Head!"

A chuckle followed the semi-audible strains, and then the young prospector lapsed into silence.

In the heart of a particularly wild and rugged stretch of country some miles southwest of Deadwood, and near the confluence of two mountain torrents, stood the collection of tents known as Camp Frolic.

At the time our story opens, the camp had been in existence upward of two weeks. As its title implied, it was not a gold-camp, but simply the rendezvous of a party of adventuresome excursionists.

Of this party, Nathan Alton, a Chicago speculator, was the head. He had been accompanied by his daughter, Alice, and his widowed sister, Angeline McMorris, together with Richard Spears and his wife, Caroline, and Gertie, their daughter.

Alton was a fine-looking man, upward of fifty years, tall and spare, with sharp, snappy gray eyes, gray hair and mustache, high cheekbones, prominent nose and firm, square chin.

"No foolishness thar!" Buck Blinkers, the guide and scout of the outfit, had declared to Jim and Bill, the teamsters. "Rub ther ha'r ther wrong way, an' ye'll strike saw-teeth, shure! An' then sparks 'll fly, ye bet!"

And the guide was correct. Nathan Alton wasn't to be trifled with.

As for Spears, he was Alton's opposite in appearance—short, fleshy, round-faced and blue-eyed. His hair and beard were red, and he looked like a good-natured, well-fed country merchant. And such, indeed, he was.

Just now, however, the corpulent little grocer was possessed of the gold-fever, and the greater part of his time was being devoted to prospecting, as was attested by the heap of so-called "specimens" piled in front of his tent.

The two weeks in camp had passed most pleasantly. The day after they had pitched their tents, the excursionists had been visited by a number of gentlemen from Deadwood, among whom was a handsome, middle-aged man, of decidedly pleasing address, who introduced himself as the Hon. Madison Morrell, and who became a frequent guest at Camp Frolic.

Morrell had represented himself to be the sole owner of the Bonny Belle, one of the best-paying mines in the Deadwood district, and as Messrs. Alton and Spears were deeply interested in mines and mining-stocks, he was received with favor, until the frequency of his visits and his attentions to Alice Alton aroused suspicions as to an ulterior motive.

About that time, however, there was an arrival in camp.

The new-comer was no less a personage than Albion Mabrey, of Denver, the betrothed husband of Alice, and as he was presented to Morrell as such, it was supposed that the matter was ended.

But the mine-owner's visits did not cease, and his manner was such as to lead Nathan Alton to believe that he had been mistaken in his suspicions.

On the morning of the day succeeding that on which Plucky Paul had so abruptly quitted the company of Old Blaze and Solid Sammy, Camp Frolic was early astir.

Immediately after breakfast, Alice and Gertie mounted and set out for a canter down the narrow valley leading southward from the camp. Albion Mabrey accompanied them.

The man from Denver was not an Apollo;

he was a medium-sized, solidly-built fellow, somewhere between twenty-five and thirty, and an agreeable companion. He had a musical voice, fine gray eyes and mobile face, and his hair and mustache were a glossy brown. Belted to his waist were a brace of good revolvers and a ten-inch bowie, and he had the appearance of a man who could use the weapons very effectively.

And Alice Alton?

A young lady, scarcely out of her teens—a blonde, with large, liquid blue eyes and heavy tresses of pale-golden hair, pretty features and pearly teeth. She was rather below medium in height, but graceful and willowy, and altogether a charming girl. She wore a dark-blue riding habit; and from its bolster peeped the handle of an elegantly-mounted revolver.

Gertie Spears was younger than her fair companion by at least four years, and a brunette, with sparkling black eyes and jet-black hair, and gave promise of rare loveliness in future years. She, too, was dressed for the saddle, and armed, and looked a picture of ease and grace.

Mabrey was unusually quiet as they galloped away from the camp. Buck Blinkers, the guide, had reported the presence of Indians in the vicinity, and, if alertness could avoid it, the man from Denver would not ride into any trap set by the handful of hostiles.

"It's risky, but I reckon you can be trusted," Nathan Alton had said, just before the little cavalcade started. "Buck is of the opinion that there are only two or three prowlers about; but use your eyes and your ears, and at the first sign of Injun beat back to camp without delay. This is our last day here. To-morrow we'll fall back to Deadwood."

Mabrey had nodded assent to the earnest, cautious strains, and now, as he rode down the valley between his fair charges, he was using his eyes and his ears—and using them to the best possible advantage, too.

"You are quiet, this morning," tersely observed Gertie, as they swept around a bend in the valley, and her black eyes fixed themselves searchingly on Mabrey's face.

"Yes—too quiet for anything but mischief," Alice added, with a laugh. "Actually, Albion, you're as mute as a mummy!"

"Can't help it, my dear girls," was the laconic response. "I suppose it's the scenery. It is certainly enough to inspire silent admiration."

"It is grand," assented Gertie, and then the party became silent.

About three miles below the camp the valley widened, forming a marshy basin, several acres in extent, which was covered with a dense growth of growing timber.

"Just the place for an ambush!" thought Mabrey, involuntarily checking his horse. "We'll go no further in this direction. It may alarm the girls, but better that—"

He started, and turned pale.

Crouching in the undergrowth, not ten paces distant, were three red-skinned brawny, well-formed fellows, hideous with the trappings of war!

For just a breath, Albion Mabrey was incapable of action. The dread possibilities of the situation flashed upon him with stunning force.

It was a trying moment, but the man from Denver proved equal to the emergency.

"Alice—Gertie! Turn back—ride for your lives!"

Uttered in the lowest of audible voices, yet ringing with deadly earnestness, the words drove the color from the faces of the girls, and frightened them into instant and unquestioning obedience. In a flash their horses were turned, and then the struggle opened.

Apprised of their detection by Mabrey's action, the red-skinned, to the number of a half-score, burst from cover, brandishing their weapons and whooping and yelling in chagrin and demoniac rage—only to shrink back under the galling fire poured into their ranks!

The man from Denver was certainly no novice. His revolvers cracked right and left, and with deadly effect, for at the first fire two of the red-skinned fell. A sharp twinge in his left arm followed the return volley, and he knew that he had been "pinked."

His gray eyes aglow, his teeth hard-set, he slipped from the saddle and sheltered himself behind his horse. A hasty glance in the direction taken by the fleeing girls showed that they were a hundred yards away, and unpursued.

"They'll get through, thank Heaven!" muttered Mabrey, with a breath of relief. "These red—"

A fresh outburst on the part of his assailants cut the sentence short. Then a heavy volley

rung out, and the bullets rattled about him like hail-stones. His horse, uttering a shrill scream, reared up and then toppled over—dead!

Mabrey's strait was now most desperate. He was absolutely without cover, and at any moment a bullet from his hidden foes might end all. His only recourse was a speedy retreat into the depths of the dense timber.

That was the course he instantly decided to take, and in a flash he disappeared in the undergrowth, followed by a futile volley from the Indian ambushade, and, a moment later, by the red-skinned themselves.

Then an appalling sound arose in front. It was nothing less than a series of signals in answer to the cries in his rear, and Albion Mabrey halted in sheer dismay.

"Hemmed in!" he exclaimed, bitterly. "Why waste strength in a useless attempt at flight? If the end must come, why not here?"

"Never say die, pard!" advised a clear young voice. "This way—quick! an' we'll wollop 'em inter fit subject fer Hades!"

Albion Mabrey started, and his keen eyes sought the speaker.

Not a dozen paces distant stood a dashing-looking youth—a cool, smiling, imperturbable fellow—revolvers in hand, and clad in a harmonious admixture of the garb of a prairie ranger and that of a mining-camp sport.

"This way, I say," iterated the youth, in unruffled accent. "That is, ef ye care to live!"

"I think I do!" Mabrey exclaimed, springing forward with an alacrity born of renewed hope. "If there's a way out of this death-net, in Heaven's name lead on!"

The youth needed no urging. Turning he led the way at a rapid pace diagonally across the valley, keeping just within the borders of the thicket. Within two minutes the fugitives reached the bank of a broad, shallow creek, midway of which was a small island, standing well up out of the water, and covered with big boulders, driftwood and undergrowth.

"That's our halt," declared the youth, as he plunged into the stream. "I reckon too good men c'u'd hold that bit ov an island ag'in' hafe t'ur red-skins in the Black Hills!"

Mabrey vouchsafed no response, but promptly entered the water. The sound in the rear told that the Indians were rapidly running the trail and might at any moment appear.

"That's my nag, Firefly, an' my rifle," the youth announced, as they clambered up the steep bank of the island and sought shelter behind the boulders. "I left 'em hyar while I scooted 'cross ter investigate the rumpus."

"Now, stranger—"

"I am Albion Mabrey, an assayer, of Denver."

"My han'le is Paul Park."

"Ranger, or sport?"

"Jest a prospector, capt'in."

"Now fill up yer barkers an' git ready fer bizness. Hyar come ther red-rinds, an' I kalkilate we'll hev our hands full!"

CHAPTER III.

EVENTS AT CAMP FROLIC.

NATHAN ALTON had gazed anxiously in the direction taken by Mabrey and the two girls when they galloped away from Camp Frolic.

"Buck, I fear that ride is a trifle perilous," he observed, turning to the guide as the trio disappeared.

"I reckon it is, kernel. Et's a leetle resky 'most any time."

"By heavens! I'll sound the recall—panic or no panic!" excitedly avowed Richard Spears, his usually florid face paling. "I sha'n't risk havin' Gertie butchered—"

"Hush, Dick!" interrupted Alton, his sinewy fingers closing tightly upon the shoulder of his friend. "Mabrey will see that no harm comes to them. Buck here reported the valley clear not an hour ago, or the girls should not have ventured out of camp. Be quiet; it's no use to throw the women into consternation."

Buck nodded his approval.

"That's boss sense," he remarked. "Thar may be reds prowlin' erbout, but thar's chances—yes, odds—ag'in' it; so w'ot's ther use gittin' ther wimmen critters skeered out o' their wits? Hey?—not a mite! Ther lad'll take keer o' ther gals, ye kin jest bet yer pile! I know him, I do! An' I posted him afore he started."

"Et might 'a' bin better to 'a' kept ther gals hyar, but sech a wrinkle, arter ther way they've bin tearin' eround, w'u'd 'a' throwed ther hull bunch ov kaliker inter hystearicks, an' so ther fat w'u'd 'a' bin in ther fire."

"Now, Mabrey'll take 'em down ther valley a couple miles, an' then round up hyar at ther

camp, arter which we kin git things inter shape to fight or to fall back ter Deadwood afore them condemned red spies kin slip back an' fetch up ther bands ter which they belong."

"And all with no fuss nor fury," observed Alton. "Buck's idea is the right one, Dick."

"Perhaps," admitted Spears, whose fears were only partially allayed. "But I would suggest that at least half of us hold ourselves in readiness to make a sortie if anything should happen."

"That wise precaution has already been taken," Alton returned. "Buck here, Bill and myself are ready to mount at an instant's notice, leaving you and Jim to defend the camp until our return."

Spears lifted his hat and nervously mopped his bald pate. He was about to utter an additional suggestion when a word from Buck silenced him.

"Thar's some one comin' down the valley from above," announced the guide, after a moment of listening. "Dodge behind that wagon, please. I allow et's a leetle too airy fer any one from Deadwood. So!—now stiddy. I'll see who et is."

With that, Buck slipped away, exercising every possible precaution to avoid being seen by any one up the valley. He was gone but a moment, and when he returned his face bore a look of commingled perturbation and disgust.

"Gents, et does seem that we're in fer a run o' hard luck," he observed, as he rejoined his employers. "Ye kin thank yer stars ther gals aire away from camp!"

"In less than two minutes, thet owdashus outlaw, Capt'in Panther-Head will be hyar, with twenty men at his back!"

"The devil!" ejaculated Alton, grasping his repeating rifle.

"Good heavens!" cried Spears, turning yet whiter and clasping his hands. "Why did I ever leave Muggville Landing! This is terrible!"

"Shall we fight?" Alton asked, with just the trace of a smile upon his indomitable face.

"No! no!" groaned Spears. "We shall all be butchered!"

"Yer friend is right," averred Buck, in reply to the question. "Ther odds aire too great. Ef we offer no resistance, they'll simply help themselves ter w'ot vallybles they kin git their claws on, an' then be off."

"But, ef ye say fight, kernel, I'm hyar, an' thet's part o' my trade."

Before Alton could utter a response, the redoubtable Panther-Head and his followers rode into view not a hundred yards away.

"Hold up your hands, gentlemen!" sung out the road-agent chief, raising his cocked rifle to a level—an example that was at once followed by his men. "We have come to levy toll!"

"Hands up it is!" returned Alton, dropping his rifle and suiting his actions to his words.

Buck and Richard Spears also raised their hands, while the two teamsters came forward and fell into line in like manner.

Then, at the word from their chief, the road-agents slowly advanced.

A motley crew they were, but all superbly mounted and well-armed. Each wore over his face a mask of dressed buckskin, save the chief, whose features were hidden beneath the skin from a panther's head.

"Halt, and dismount," he ordered, when his cavalcade had reached a point within a few paces of Alton and his companion. "Moses, detail four men to assist you in keeping watch and ward over these prisoners," with a gesture to indicate our friends. "If they evince a disposition to resist, or in any wise become belligerent, make short work with them."

"Aaron, pick five men, and with them follow me to those tents."

"Joshua, you will have command of the reserve force. See that we are not molested or interrupted."

With that, Captain Panther-Head dismounted and strode away in the direction of the tents, closely followed by Aaron and the five picked men.

It was clearly evident that the outlaw expected to encounter resistance.

The tents in question constituted the camp proper, and were fully fifty yards distant. The wagon beside which Alton and his friends were ranged in line had served as the quarters of the two teamsters, and had been drawn aside that they might be near the horses.

Cautiously approaching the rear of the largest of the tents, Captain Panther-Head inclined his head and listened a moment, then produced a sharp-pointed knife and cut a slit in the stout canvas.

To the opening thus made, he applied his eye.

His scrutiny was seemingly as unsatisfactory as brief, for after a single sweeping glance at the interior of the tent he turned away with a muttered oath.

"The girls are not there, boys, nor is Albion Mabrey," he announced, in a low voice. "The two old ladies are alone. We must look elsewhere. In all probability the trio are off on a jaunt through the hills."

"A glance at the horses, captain, if you are sufficiently well informed, would be the quickest way to determine if your surmise is correct," suggested the outlaw Aaron. "They are picketed just beyond the wagon yonder."

"I am perfectly informed, even to the smallest detail of the camp," complacently returned Panther-Head. "And, Aaron, your suggestion was well made. I can see at a glance that three of the animals are missing—Mabrey's among them."

"Then," continued Aaron, "if we suddenly pounce upon the old ladies we can frighten them into revealing the exact direction taken by the two."

To this proposition the chief nodded a vigorous negative.

"We shall not attempt that," he declared. "We shall not disturb or alarm them. They are ignorant of our presence here, and it is better so. No, if we cannot wring the truth from old man Spears, it will devolve upon us to pick up the trail as best we may."

Having thus briefly outlined the course he intended to pursue, Captain Panther-Head at once retraced his steps to the wagon, closely followed by his squad.

Nathan Alton had watched the outlaws' movements with anxious eyes, and as he noted their singular maneuvers he immediately jumped to the conclusion that Buck's surmise had been incorrect—that Captain Panther-Head's real object was not simply to secure and appropriate the valuables of the party, but to abduct Alice Alton and Gertie Spears!

"They have discovered that the girls are absent, and the next move will be an attempt to learn their whereabouts," was the thought that presented itself as the outlaws faced toward the wagon. "Owing to the nature of the ground below the camp, it will be an extremely difficult matter for them to pick up the trail, and if Dick will only keep a still tongue in his head it will not be a hard matter to mislead them."

At that point, Panther-Head approached, and the speculator's cogitations came to an end.

"Nathan Alton," said the outlaw, "I want to ask you a question, and I must have a truthful answer. 'Lie to me, or attempt to mislead me, and you will not live to reach Deadwood!'"

"Ah, indeed!" exclaimed the speculator, smiling grimly. "A little fortetance on your part, then, Mr. Beast, will undoubtedly save me trouble. 'Ask me no questions, and I'll tell you no lies.'"

Uttering an oath, the strangely-hooded chief stepped back a pace and addressed a few words to Moses.

That worthy and his four fellows immediately advanced until the nozzles of their weapons almost touched the five men.

"Now," resumed Panther-Head, again addressing Alton, "the very best thing you fellows can do is to cling to the truth. Otherwise—" He pointed significantly to the leveled guns.

"What I want to know is, where are the two young ladies accompanying this outfit? Where is Albion Mabrey?"

"Answer these questions, and you are—"

At that moment came a startling interruption.

Up from the lower valley, borne on the pleasant south wind came the rattling echo of a distant volley, closely followed by a burst of war-whoops.

The sounds, faint as they were, told a disquieting story.

Albion Mabrey and his fair charges had encountered the red-skins!

Captain Panther-Head started sharply. No second glance at the white, agonized faces of Alton and Spears was needed to apprise him of the exact state of affairs.

"Mount, boys, and away!" he cried, turning to his horse and vaulting into the saddle. "Our quarry is in the hands of the Sioux!"

That was all. With the precision of trained cavalrymen the outlaws remounted and formed two abreast; then, led by their redoubtable chief, they swept down the valley at a dead run.

Nor was Alton idle. As the outlaws sprung forward in response to their leader's command, the gamey speculator wheeled, and, with a word

to the guide and Bill, the teamster, darted back to where the three horses were in readiness.

Overcome with consternation and chagrin, Richard Spears sunk limply upon a rock and buried his face in his hands.

"Dick! Jim! look out for the camp!" cried Alton, as he thundered by on a magnificent black horse, closely followed by Buck and Bill.

Spears raised his head and gazed anxiously after the swiftly receding trio.

"What makes me such an infernal coward?" he groaned, in agony of spirit. "I'd give half I'm worth to have the sand that man has!"

"Cain't all be fighters, boss," Jim tersely observed. "'Sides, ef ye war goin' whar that man is, ye'd likely be willin' ter give all ye're wu'th ter be back hyar."

"Now, boss, while ye rest a bit I'm goin' ter slip up on ter thet knoll back ov ther tents. I reckon ef any one gits inter this hyar camp 'thout my seein' them they'll be plum' good ones."

Jim did not await a response. A swift, sidelong glance warned him of the approach of Mesdames Spears and McMorris from the direction of their tent, and, as both seemed to be laboring under great mental perturbation, the teamster wisely betook himself off as expeditiously as possible.

The two ladies, from their position just within the tent, had witnessed the flight down the valley of Captain Panther-Head and his men, and a moment later that of Nathan Alton and his friends.

It hardly needs to be said that when the unpalatable truth had been fairly tortured from the unwilling and well-nigh palsied tongue of Richard Spears, that the ladies for a time verged upon distraction.

To the wretched and despairing inmates of Camp Frolic, the minutes seemed to drag by with horrible slowness. Ever and anon, the wind would waft to their ears the report of firearms, or a burst of savage yells, from some point two or three miles down the valley; then, again, all would become silent—the feathered songsters cease their warbling, Nature's voices grow hushed and still.

An hour had passed since Alton's departure from the camp, when Jim from his position on the knoll, sung out:

"Hello! ther camp, thar!"

"In about two minutes an' a hafe, ye'll hev a visitor—ther Honabul Madison Morrell, ov Deadwood!"

Spears gained his feet with a bound, a look of intense relief breaking through the pallor of his face.

"Thank Heaven!" he ejaculated.

"Thank the Lord!" echoed Mrs. McMorris.

A moment later Jim's prediction was verified. A handsome, well-dressed man of middle age, with bright hazel eyes and a full brown beard, cantered into camp at a leisurely pace, courteously lifted his silk hat, dismounted and with the rein over his arm advanced, with hand extended, saying:

"Good-morning ladies! How do you do, Mr.—"

"Gracious heavens! what has happened, my dear friends! What is the matter?"

"Matter enough!" uttered Spears, hoarsely; and then, in the fewest words possible, he narrated the events of the morning.

Morrell was visibly affected by the hurried and disjointed recital. His expressive face betrayed both surprise and pain.

"This plagued Panther-Head has been the pest and the terror of the Deadwood trail long enough," he declared, when Spears had concluded. "I have no doubt that your daughter and Miss Alton are now captives in his power, even if the Sioux first captured them; for the outlaws are numerically strong, and desperate fighters."

"But, courage, my friends. Something may yet be done to effect a rescue. I am going back to Deadwood as fast as my horse can carry me. Before many hours, I shall be on the trail, with a strong posse of picked men at my back."

"May God speed and bless you!" uttered Mrs. McMorris, in a choked voice.

With a swift glance at the lady's comely face, Morrell pressed his lips to her hand, then sprung into the saddle and hurried away.

CHAPTER IV.

A DISAGREEABLE SURPRISE.

A GLANCE at the overgrown marsh-land which he had just traversed sufficed to convince Albion Mabrey of the truth of Plucky Paul's assertion.

Not less than a half-score Sioux warriors were

in plain view, advancing as rapidly as the tangled undergrowth would permit.

"We shall indeed have our hands full," he assented, as he hastened to reload his weapons.

"They have not seen us yet."

"No," returned Paul, "we aire as completely hidden es ef ole Mother Earth had opened an' swallowed us. The driftwood an' bowlders on the borders of this island hide us completely, an' at the same time might furnish us tip-top breast-works. Barrin' accidents, we should be able to stand 'em off, I should say."

"If they do not charge down upon the island in a body," Mabrey observed. "In that event, I doubt if we would be able to beat them off."

"They won't try that but once, Denver, if at all," declared Paul. "It's not their style. Now, you keep your eye on the cusses, while I git Firefly out o' sight. I don't want her to stop any o' their bullets."

To this proposition the young assayer gave a ready assent, and Paul turned his attention to his handsome filly.

At a word from the lad, the well-trained animal dropped upon her side, in which position she would remain until ordered to get up.

Paul's next move was to examine his repeating-rifle, to make sure that it was in perfect working order. Scarcely had he assured himself on that point, when Mabrey, in a low tone, announced that the red-skins had regained the opposite bank.

"That's nigh enough—sart'in!" muttered Plucky Paul, as he glided back to the assayer's side. "We may as well give 'em our compliments, Denver. Don't waste your ammunition—it's none too plenty, an' we cain't tell how long the cusses may hold us hyar."

"D'ye see that young chief off to the left thar—thet galoot with the bear-claws around his neck? Wal, I'll take him. You nail the old buck. Just this way—right at the water's edge."

"Aire ye ready?"

"Ready."

The detonation of the Winchester, and the lighter report of the revolver rung out exactly together, and were instantly followed by a general outburst of whoops and yells on the part of the Sioux.

The next minute not a living red-skin was in sight. Every brave had disappeared as if by magic.

"Now, be keerful!" warned Paul, as Mabrey restlessly moved aside to peer through an aperture in the driftwood. "They're hid in the undergrowth over thar, an' they know exactly whar we aire. Ef you show yourself, you're a gone coon!"

"True for you," returned Mabrey, with a quiet smile. "But it is not my intention to show myself. On the contrary—"

The report of his revolver ended the sentence. With a peculiarly sharp, shrill yell, a brawny brave, who had been crouching in the midst of a clump of rushes on the opposite shore, sprung half erect, then plunged head-first into the creek.

Another vocal outburst from the Sioux followed the tragedy.

"Well done, pardner," cried Paul. "You han'le thet weepor like an old-timer! Reckon this ain't your first campaign?"

"Hardly," returned Mabrey, smilingly; "nor is it yours, I judge."

"No, I've bin brushin' ag'in' 'em sence I kin remember," responded Paul. "Thet was the best p'int in Uncle Bill's make-up—he c'u'd fight Injuns to the queen's taste."

"Uncle Bill?"

"The man who brung me up," Paul explained. "He allers claimed he was my uncle, but betwixt us I've thought for some time that that yarn was the biggest kind ov a ghost story."

"And so you decided to dissolve partnership?" guessed Mabrey.

"Exactly."

At that point the conversation ended. It was evident that the red-skins were about to change their tactics, and the defenders of the island turned their entire attention to meeting and baffling the cunning of the savages.

Signals sounded at various points in the undergrowth, and it became apparent that the besiegers were retreating.

"Now, look out for squalls," advised Mabrey. "A retreat now means that they have hit upon some ruse, by means of which they hope to dislodge us."

"Thet's it," Paul affirmed. "I reckon we won't get away till after nightfall."

Mabrey's face visibly lengthened.

"I am afraid you are right," he returned, dis-

consolately. "We can only wait and see what turns up."

Contrary to the expectations of the fugitives, however, the red-skins did not renew the attack, and it soon became evident that the entire band was hurrying up the valley.

As Mabrey noted the fact, he turned pale. "They intend to attack Camp Frolic," he muttered. "If they do the camp is doomed!"

"What's that, pardner?" quickly asked Paul, his keen ears catching the half-audible strains. "You have friends up the valley?"

The man from Denver nodded an affirmative, and tersely explained the situation, in conclusion saying:

"I fear the young ladies have fallen into the hands of the wretches. If they have, the camp will undoubtedly be surprised and wiped out, unless we can in some way prevent it."

Paul shook his head.

"The gals escaped the red-skins, pardner," he declared, as positively as promptly. "You kin depend upon that. I was hyar on the island at the time, an' saw 'em pass that open p'int yonder an' they was not even pursued. They war the scouts or the band you run into, fu'st off, an' the gals got away 'fore the main gang came up."

"Then the girls must have reached the camp, and warned Alton," decided Albion Mabrey, with a breath of relief.

"Barrin' accidents on the way," amended Paul. "These Hills are a mighty onsartin bit o' kentry pardner."

"We will assume that the girls succeeded in getting back to camp," Mabrey continued, "and proceed to discuss our own cases, as it is of the utmost importance that we get away from here in short order."

"The question is, when and how shall we leave? And, more:—how many red spies were left in the undergrowth over there to keep an eye on us?"

"These are the three vital points we have to decide, my young friend, and we cannot be too sure of our premises before we draw conclusions."

"I guess that's right, pardner," assented Paul, with the gravity of a sage. "I ain't quite up to your lingo, but I reckon I ketch the meanin' of it."

"The fu'st thing to git at is the spies, an' I don't know any better way ov drawin' 'em out than by workin' the old trick ov the hat."

"Nor I," Mabrey declared.

"Then up she goes," said Paul, and by means of his rifle, he elevated the crown of his hat above the crest of the boulder.

The time-honored artifice of the Indian-fighter in this case evoked not so much as a shot. If there were spies in the undergrowth, they were too long-headed to be gulled into wasting their ammunition.

"What do you think of it?" asked Paul a moment later, as he returned his hat to his head.

"I don't believe there is a red in the brush," Mabrey replied. "You worked the trick admirably—it would have fooled me, had I been across there."

"Still, it w'u'dn't be altogether pleasant to get up an' then set down ag'in socked full ov lead," suggested Paul.

"No, but I am going to risk it," was Mabrey's response. "As I said, I don't believe there's a red-skin over there. They retreated as stealthily as possible, with the intention of leaving us in the belief that they were simply forming a new scheme of attack. They probably calculated that two or three hours would suffice for them to clean out Camp Frolic, after which they could again turn their attention to us. On their return, if they found that we had quitted the island, they could depend upon their trailers to run us down."

This surmise was correct throughout. The young assayer had hit upon the exact programme of Black Bear, the leader of the Sioux band.

Within ten minutes, Mabrey and Plucky Paul had crossed directly into the undergrowth, and from that point followed the red-skins up the valley.

As Black Bear's followers had made no attempt to cover their trail, our friends were enabled to proceed quite rapidly, Paul leading Firefly and walking beside Mabrey.

As yet they had devised no plans to enter Camp Frolic should they find it environed by the Sioux. The dominant idea was to reach the vicinity of the camp, after which events would shape the course to be pursued.

Though their advance was rapid, it was characterized by prudence and caution. Both were keenly alert.

They had gained a point something over a

mile from the thicket, when Paul suddenly halted and, with a quick glance at Mabrey, pointed to the ground.

"What do you make of it?" asked the assayer, in a startled tone, after he had scanned the trampled earth. "The trail is 'most heavy enough to have been made by a company of cavalry!"

"It puzzles me," frankly admitted Paul. "But ov one thing we may be sure—'twasn't made by any one friendly to us. It may have bin made by a mounted gang ov reds, or by a passle ov white outlaws—even by old Panther-Head himself."

Mabrey nodded his approval of the idea.

"And if not friendly to us, friendly to the Sioux," he added.

"An' we may also feel assured that they have captured the ladies," declared Paul, again advancing. "An' hyar is the proof they are friendly: the reds were goin' up the valley, the mounted gang comin' down; they met back there, an' then the whole bunch came this way, an' turned off into this defile."

True enough; the trail at that point quitted the valley.

For a moment Mabrey seemed puzzled.

"Is it not possible that the party going down were white men, and turned back on discovering the reds in advance?" he asked. "May not the Sioux have pursued them into this defile?"

"No," and Paul nodded a vigorous negative. "The mounted fellows outnumbered the others nearly two to one. They'd hardly have run away."

Mabrey looked at the young nomad admiringly.

"You read a trail as readily as I would an open book," he remarked. "You may take the lead in this matter."

"What is to be our next move?"

"We must learn if the girls have been captured by the allies; an' if they have, into just whose hands they have fallen."

Leaving Firefly in Mabrey's hands, Paul continued up the valley for perhaps a hundred yards, closely examining the trail.

"They've got the girls," he declared, on his return. "There's no trail leadin' up beyond this defile."

The Boy Prospector then concealed the filly in the depths of a thicket hard by, and with Mabrey entered the defile.

For upward of an hour they hurried onward, using every possible precaution against an ambush, and in due course arrived on the border of a second valley, running almost parallel with the one they had quit to enter the defile.

A strange scene was before them.

Down in the valley, in the midst of a clump of noble pines, stood a temporary encampment. In plain view, just within the entrance of a wick-up, sat Alice Alton and Gertie Spears, while lounging about beneath the pines were a number of Sioux, tricked out with all the savagery of war, and mingled with them an equal number of white men—outlaws.

Mabrey drew a long breath. At the same moment, Paul touched his arm and glided into the shelter of a clump of bushes.

"What shall we do?" queried the assayer, agitatedly. "Heavens! those poor girls are in an awful predicament!"

"That they be," Paul assented, but little more calmly. "I kin feel for 'em—I've bin thar myself."

"Now, Pard Denver, as near as I kin tell ye, the best thing ye kin do is to slip through the defile, git my nag an' cut back to your camp as tight as she kin go. From there, go or send to Deadwood, an' fetch down fifteen or twenty good men, well armed. I'll stay hyar an' keep an eye on the varlets. If they move, I'll move too, and mark ther trail so plain you kin foller it after night if need be. Now, bump yerself! You'd ought to be back 'long toward evenin'."

Mabrey arose to obey the hurried instructions. His eyes encountered three forms crouching in a patch of undergrowth a few rods to his right, and he uttered an exclamation of relief.

"It is Alton, as I live!" he explained, in a low tone, as Paul started up. "And with him are the guide and one of the teamsters."

"Wait!—we'll attract their attention an' j'ine 'em," said Paul, picking up a small pebble.

But at that moment came a startling interruption.

A brace of revolvers clicked sharply, and up from the undergrowth behind the two started a pair of meanly-costumed forms, with the sibilant warning:

"Drap them stuns, ye conjemmed runt—drap 'em. I say, or by hocus! I'll brain ye!"

The Boy Prospector started, and his heart sunk.

It required no glance at the face of the speaker to apprise him of the fact that he and Mabrey were covered by the weapons of Old Bill Blaze and Solid Sammy, the Decoy!

CHAPTER V.

PLUCKY PAUL'S ADVENTURES.

Now, han's up, both ov ye!" continued Old Bill Blaze, in the same subdued, yet angry, hissing strains, as Paul permitted the pebbles to drop from his fingers.

"Sammy, 'll ye disarm 'em?"

"Sart'in, pard," and the Hills outlaw moved forward, thrusting his revolvers back into the holsters attached to his belt. "You first, Mister Man," addressing Mabrey. "Ther kid kin wait; he's p'izen, but he ain't so hefty."

The assayer gritted his teeth. His hands opened and closed nervously. To be captured now—the thought was too much; it maddened him. His muscles hardened; the fire in his blood swelled his veins until they stood out like so many whipcords.

He darted a sidelong glance at Plucky Paul. The boy's shrewd gray eyes seemed to twinkle an affirmative—an assent to the proposition embodied in the glance.

"Now, easy, boss, an' ye won't be hurted," muttered Solid Sammy, just then, as he produced and tested a thong of buckskin. "Jes' stick out yer paws—"

Smash!

The sentence closed with a grunt, and the outlaw went down in a heap. The assayer had obeyed the command, but in a way not at all conducive to the comfort or facial beauty of Solid Sammy.

Thrown off his guard by the unexpected onslaught, Old Bill Blaze had scarcely more than time to utter a grunt expressive of dissatisfaction and disgust, ere he himself went down, out of breath and used up generally.

At the moment of Mabrey's stroke, Plucky Paul had nimbly thrown a sort of flip flap, during which evolution he forcibly planted his feet against the pit of his whilom partner's stomach.

For a moment the two desperadoes were in anything but fighting trim. Solid Sammy had been knocked silly, while Old Bill Blaze was curled up into a knot, gasping for breath.

"What next, pardner?" asked Mabrey. "We've got 'em down, but what shall we do with 'em?"

"Tie an' gag yer man," returned Paul, quietly. "I don't believe they want to alarm the camp down there, but we can't take chances, so we'll make it a sure thing by gagging 'em."

The task was not at all difficult. Each of the desperadoes carried with him a number of buckskin thongs, with which our friends quickly pinioned the wrists and ankles of both. Bits of green wood cut from the thicket were made to serve as gags, and then the tying operation was declared complete.

"Thank Heaven! we've completely turned the tables!" uttered Mabrey, with a breath of relief, as he stepped back a pace and calmly surveyed their work. "Do you know, Paul, who these men are?"

"I do that," was the emphatic avowal. "They are no good—two of the biggest rascals in the Hills. The one you knocked down is Solid Sammy, an' rascal sticks out all over him; it's in his eye, an' all over his face."

"T'other one is my lamented uncle, Old Bill Blaze. He's no better'n the company we fin him in."

"And their object in attacking us?"

Paul moodily shook his head.

"I'm a leetle puzzled there, pardner," he replied. "So far as I kin see, it must 'a' bin they were after. I slipped away, ye know, they have follered, not only to git my dust, w' to take me into camp at the same time. w'uth money to Uncle Bill, ye see, fer 'e-stolen kid, an' he expects some one to 'an-down' harnsomenly some day on my account."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Mabrey. "But yed see that your extraordinary statement, with the facts, Paul! Just look at t' picked face!"

True enough; Blaze's sharp visag expect—that moment fairly distorted with di e camp wrath.

"And now," cautioned the assayer. The his gaze to the position occupied by ds were his party, "let us get back to the ot's of the "I see that our friends yonder have side that alarmed by our little fracas. S' of the largest tract their attention."

Paul signified his approval, d inclined his about him for a small missile; en produced a ture a peculiar, wailing cry.

pplied his eye.

throat of Solid Sammy, to be instantly followed by a piercing yell!

A single glance at the miscreant disclosed a startling fact. He had slipped the gag sideways, and bitten through the cords holding it in place!

"Ho! ho!" he grated, glaring savagely at his amazed and alarmed captors, "ye've hed yer inning, dern ye! Mine is comin' now!"

"Quick, pardner!" cried Plucky Paul, with a swift glance out into the valley. "Those cries were signals! This galoot is on a friendly footin' with that cohort down there. We've got to scoot—an' scoot quick!"

"But Blaze, here—yo'r uncle!"

Paul hesitated.

"I'll cut him loose, an' risk it," he decided. "He may, or he may not, be in with that gang."

That was all. His knife flashed in the sunlight, and the next instant, with Mabrey, he darted into the defile, just as a slight crashing in the undergrowth announced the flight of Alton and his companions.

There were not many points at which the defile could easily be quitted; but they had been so fortunate as to secure a long start of their pursuers, and Paul entertained but little fear as to the result.

After a run of ten or fifteen minutes at a steady pace, the young prospector halted and narrowly scanned that part of the defile which they had just traversed.

There was no one in sight.

"I'm goin' to leave you hyar," he announced, turning to Mabrey. "I don't think they'll make much ov a pursuit. Skip along down the pass till you come to Firefly, an' then go ahead jest as we talked it over."

"And you?"

"I'll keep an eye on the camp."

"It'll be risky, since the alarm has been given."

"Trust me to look out for Number 1. Take keer ov yerself. So-long!"

With that, the nomad slipped into the mouth of a ravine opening into the pass, and the next minute disappeared.

Mabrey, realizing that expostulation would be useless, continued his flight.

A quarter of a mile beyond the defile, Paul quitted the ravine, and took his way across a stony piece of ground to break his trail. When he felt that that feat had been successfully accomplished, he once more turned his face toward the outlaw camp.

His advance was slow and extremely cautious. He felt that much depended upon his efforts, and his chivalrous young soul was in the task of rescuing the captive maidens. If the attempt resulted in failure, it should at least be through no fault of his.

Thus, the better part of an hour was consumed in regaining a point overlooking the valley, and then a glance apprised him of a startling fact.

The encampment was no longer there.

"The cohort have moved up or down the valley," was the thought that presented itself as explanatory of the sudden evanishment. "They will hunt a place harder to approach."

And after cogitating the matter a few minutes, the lad shrewdly jumped to the conclusion that the retreat had been made up rather than down the valley.

"There's better kiver for 'em up there, an' y they know it," he muttered. "For who kin is they be but Panther-Head's gang?—who, indeed? The outlaw hang-out is up there some'r's; but jest where, no honest man knows. Kin I find it? t Kin I git back in time to meet the Denver chap? Can't tell till I try nohow!"

Keeping well up on the hillside, he hurried dislong for perhaps a mile, then descended and warssed the valley to the opposite slope. By this

Tove he not only confirmed his suspicion as to ing's direction taken by the outlaws, but at the

Alhe time secured the advantage of better cover. coundr hours he continued onward, occasionally

Capoing to study the trail; then on and on, second g valley narrowed into a shadowy gorge, Alton ang with towering cliffs and rocky crags. the exact amination of the trail showed that it led

"Moun between the yawning jaws of the rock, to his horhout a breath of hesitancy the Boy Pros-quarry is 'unged into the chilling gloom.

That wanced warily, cautiously. cavalryme that peril lurked in every foot of his two abreack-bound pathway.

chief, they s undoubtedly led to the rendezvous run.

Nor was Alton ded. At any moment a bullet forward in resposh might end Paul's trailing. the gamey specul the kind happened. So far as

appearances went, the place was absolutely deserted. Not even a sign of animal life was to be noted.

"They're too strong to keer for pursuit," thought Paul, as he glanced at the trampled earth.

The real explanation of the seeming carelessness soon presented itself, however; for at a point half a mile above the entrance to the gorge, the way became so hard and stony that not a trace of the trail remained.

And within the next half mile, as many as six passages branched off, right and left, from the main channel, each with a bottom so solid and flint-like that a brigade might have filed away into its gloomy recesses without leaving a trace to mark the passage!

As the Boy Prospector noted these facts, he sat down upon a bench in awe of the towering walls to think the matter over and decide upon the best course to pursue.

His meditations were not long uninterrupted. Stealthy footsteps warned him of the approach of some one from below, and he dodged into one of the numerous branching passages, just as a small squad of Sioux braves came into view.

Had he been seen?

Paul thought not, and silently hastened deeper into the zigzag defile. Turning a sharp angle, he found that the passage narrowed to a width of but three or four feet, while the walls overhead jutted together to form a natural archway.

Beyond this, the passage grew wider, and then a dozen yards further on, ended in a towering mass of rock so steep and precipitous as at once to banish the idea of an ascent.

Plucky Paul's heart failed him.

He was in a pocket—a *cul-de-sac*!

"If they saw me—"

His fears were confirmed ere he could finish the sentence. A feathered head was thrust into view at the outer end of the archway, and as quickly withdrawn!

"That *does* settle it!" uttered the boy, grimly, as he took his Winchester from his shoulder and looked about for shelter. "Aha! that boulder will do, Al. Now I'm ready for the hull Sioux nation—till night!"

The lad's position was indeed a strong one. The boulder in question lay in a corner at the end of the passage, and at once afforded him excellent cover and gave him complete command of the narrow archway. Just back of the great rock was a low, wide opening four or five feet in depth, into which he could retreat should the red-skins ascend to the top of the passage to pick him off.

Paul's eyes had been quick to note the advantage of the spot, and he at once comprehended the truth. Until night came, he would have but little to fear.

And then? Under cover of the darkness, the Sioux would creep down upon him, and he would be utterly powerless to ward off their approach.

That the crafty red-skins had decided on just this course was soon evidenced by their conduct. But for an occasional glimpse of a tufted head without the archway, the besieged lad might easily have believed himself alone in the *cul-de-sac*.

But with the coming of twilight, it became evident that they were preparing for the final maneuver. Paul could hear their guttural voices as they discussed the situation and laid their plans.

The gray light quickly gave way to intense darkness, and then came a faint, creeping sound. The Sioux had begun their advance. Their catlike tread announced that they had formed a chain across the pass—that no chance would be given their prey to slip them.

Paul's eyes glittered, and his face grew white. He felt that his last hope of escape was gone. It would be impossible to slip through that unyielding, merciless line.

Shifting his rifle at his back, he loosened his knife in his belt and with a revolver in each hand retreated into the low opening behind the boulder, to make a last, desperate stand.

"Here goes!" he muttered. "The sooner it is over with, the better."

He raised both revolvers and fired at the shadowy line.

As if that had been the signal agreed upon, the red-skins threw caution to the winds. Yelling like demons, they charged around and over the boulder, straight into the shallow opening.

A moment of wild commotion—of breathless groping and grasping, and then a strange hush came over the turbulent crew, to be broken by a burst of guttural ejaculations of astonishment and chagrin.

The cavity was empty!

The Boy Prospector could not have vanished more completely or mysteriously had the solid rock at his back miraculously opened and engulfed him!

CHAPTER VI.

MABREY SURPRISED.

SHORTLY after the noon hour, the panic-stricken denizens of Camp Frolic were startled by a second hail from the sentinel on the knoll.

"Hallo! ther camp!"

"Hallo! hallo!" returned Spears, springing up.

"Man comin' up ther valley," Jim then tersely announced.

"Who is it?"

"Cain't tell yit. He's astraddle ov a black hoss, an' he rides like thet chap from Denver. Lordy! how he's gittin' over ther groun'!"

A moment later Spears was able to distinguish the beat of the flying hoofs, and then Albion Mabrey swept into view.

A feeling of intense relief came over the party at sight of the young assayer, and when he sprung from the saddle he was instantly surrounded.

"I've no time to answer questions, my friends," he said, in reply to the torrent of interrogations with which he was greeted. "Yes, the girls are in the hands of the Sioux. Alton and the guide and Bill are over there in the Hills, if they have not also fallen into the clutches of the red-skins."

"Hold my horse a moment, Mr. Spears. I must get a fresh supply of cartridges and then be off for Deadwood. We need help to rescue the girls."

"Heaven help us!" groaned Spears, as he mechanically assumed charge of Firefly. "It is as I feared! Poor Gertie!—poor Alice!"

Caroline Spears and Mrs. McMorris turned a shade paler and retreated to their hut.

Mabrey was but a moment in securing the desired ammunition; but, brief as was the assayer's absence, it gave Spears a chance partially to regain his composure.

"Morrell was down from Deadwood this morning," he said, as Mabrey resumed his place in the saddle. "As soon as he learned of our misfortune, he turned back to secure a force sufficient to pull us through and rescue the girls."

"He appeared an hour or so after Panther-Head and his men had—"

"Panther-Head?" quickly interrupted Mabrey. "Has that outlaw been here?"

"Yes, he appeared but a few minutes after you and the girls had ridden away. He had come to secure Alice and Gertie, and was disappointed in finding them gone. At the sound of firing down the valley, he galloped in that direction, closely followed by Alton, Buck and Bill."

Mabrey's teeth closed with a sharp click. This bit of intelligence not only confirmed his suspicion as to the identity of the girls' captors, but at the same time suggested the utter futility of ordinary measures looking to a rescue.

"I'll ransack Deadwood and go penniless rather than fail to find men suited to the undertaking!" he muttered, desperately.

"Mr. Spears," he continued, aloud, "permit me to offer a suggestion. As soon as it is dark, mount, and have Jim there conduct you to Deadwood. Make your preparations as secretly as possible, as the country below here is swarming with Sioux. Abandon wagons, tent—everything. Don't lose a minute after nightfall."

With that, he gave Firefly her head, leaving Spears well-nigh speechless with terror and dismay.

The assayer himself was scarcely less agitated, but the emotions torturing his soul were of a different type. Doubt, uncertainty as to the ultimate result of his mission, oppressed him. There was nothing of personal fear in his mental agony.

At an abrupt turn in the valley, three or four miles above Camp Frolic, voices and the sounds of an approaching cavalcade warned him to turn aside and seek cover until he could satisfy himself as to the identity and attitude of the party.

To his unutterable relief, the horseman proved to be the Hon. Madison Morrell and an even half-score thoroughly-armed men. Their objective point was undoubtedly Camp Frolic, whence they would take the trail of Panther-Head.

As soon as he had satisfied himself upon this point, Mabrey spurred out from the neighboring thicket into which he had ridden for shelter and boldly approached the cavalcade.

At sight of the young assayer, Morrell started, then spurred forward, a pleasant smile on his handsome face and with hand extended, saying: "This is indeed an agreeable surprise, Mr. Mabrey."

"Permit me to ask you how are matters at Camp Frolic? You have come directly from there, I presume?"

"As straight as the crow flies," Mabrey returned, accepting the proffered hand. "Matters have changed but little since morning."

"But I am indeed glad to meet you, Mr. Morrell, with these well-armed men at your back. Their services are sadly needed, and, as they appear to be determined fellows, this meeting saves me a trip to Deadwood."

"They are picked men, and can be depended upon to obey orders," responded Morrell, with a lingering glance over his shoulder. "They have been in service under me before, and we understand each other thoroughly."

"For instance?"

Morrell, turning his horse aside, dropped his handkerchief from his pocket. The snowy linen had scarcely touched the ground ere there was a sharp jangle of spurs and two of the foremost riders darted forward, each checking his horse and seizing one of Mabrey's wrists when he was exactly between them.

"That was certainly well done!" exclaimed the assayer, with a nod of appreciation. "But of just what use is such a trick, Mr. Morrell?"

"Oh, of infinite use," was the mockingly-uttered reply, with a smile whereat Mabrey started. "One of its uses you have just seen exemplified. The fact is, Mr. Mabrey, while not exactly a tenderfoot, you are altogether too green to rub up against such men as Panther-Head and his band!"

"Bind him, boys; and if he evinces the slightest desire to yell or kick up a disturbance, gag him! We can't imperil the success of our expedition by having him bear us company."

Mabrey flushed angrily and struggled desperately to throw off the clutch upon his wrists. It was in vain.

He was a captive!

In less than the time required to tell it, his belt was stripped of its weapons, and his wrists were pinioned at his back. Then a rude gag was thrust into his mouth, and the task declared complete.

"Stipple, away with him!" ordered Morrell.

"Come, lads, we'll away to the rescue!" and at the head of his nine the handsome gentleman from Deadwood spurred onward down the valley.

Stipple gazed after them a moment, then, with a broad grin on his homely face, turned to his charge.

"Et's cur'us w'ot a devil ov a rumpus a woman kin kick up, anyway," he soliloquized, as he seized the reins lying over the horn of Mabrey's saddle and urged the horses forward. "How they kin knock a feller silly! How they kin smash a galoot's think machinery an' turn 'im inter a bloomin', knock-kneed idjit!"

With that, the fellow lapsed into silence. A mile further on, he turned from the valley into a narrow cut running away at right angles. On and on he rode, until the afternoon was considerably more than half gone.

They were in a perfect network of passes, when Stipple suddenly halted and relieved Mabrey of the gag.

"Ye're to keep quiet—bear that in mind," he said, as he flung the gag out of sight. "We're approachin' the Horseshoe Mine, Morrell's best claim, an' ther milder ye act ther better ye'll be treated."

Mabrey vouchsafed no response to the admonition. His jaws were so stiff from their long distention as to render him incapable of uttering a syllable.

A moment later a sentry, hidden in one of the innumerable fissures in the rocks, hailed and demanded the countersign.

"I—have—not—got—it!" returned Stipple, clearly and emphatically, with a peculiar gesture.

"Ride on—ride on," cried the sentry. "I know you."

A covert smile crossed Mabrey's face. The cunning arrangement of the countersign had not deceived him.

A few minutes later Stipple dismounted before the entrance to a cavern in the rocks and helped the captain from his horse.

At that juncture, two men appeared from the interior of the cave, and at a word from Stipple took charge of the horses.

Mabrey was then taken by the arm and conducted inside.

A strange scene lay before him.

The cavern was dry and commodious, and well lighted. Scattered about the sandy floor, in groups of two and three, were a dozen men—stout, rugged-looking fellows, busy with cards and pipes.

Guiding his prisoner directly across this outer chamber, Stipple entered a low, wide corridor, along which he proceeded for perhaps forty feet, then halted before a stout wooden door set in the rocks.

"Your quarters, captain," he announced, turning to Mabrey with a grim smile, as he opened the door and disclosed a small, cell-like chamber. "Step inside, please. Ye'll find it quite snug an' comfortable!"

There was no helping the matter, and in the assayer went.

"I'd like to loosen up yer hands a bit," Stipple continued, "but it's ag'in' orders. Ther boss 'll be in ter see ye hy-an-by, an' mebbe ye kin fix things with him."

Then the door closed, a key rattled in the lock and Mabrey was alone in the rock-bound chamber.

Tortured and distressed as he was in soul and in mind, it seemed to the young assayer that the promised visit of the boss was delayed beyond reason.

"Curse the tricky scoundrel!" he gritted, over and over again. "If ever I escape from this infernal trap, I'll call him to strict account! To think of my being trussed up here, with Alice and Gertie helpless in the hands of that horde of red and white outlaws. The wretch! the devil!"

Then, in anguish of spirit, the hapless lover would pace the narrow limits of his dark, cell-like chamber, tugging desperately to burst the pinions confining his arms, or despondently sink upon the cool stones, fuming at his ill-luck and breathing threats against his captor.

Thus passed the hours until nightfall. Then the door was suddenly thrust open and a man bearing a lantern stepped into the place.

Mabrey started to his feet in astonishment. The intruder was Buck Blinkers, the guide!

CHAPTER VII.

IN WHICH OLD ACQUAINTANCES MEET.

"SH!" cautioned the veteran borderman, with a warning gesture, as he put down the lantern and advanced toward Albion Mabrey. "Not too loud, my friend, or some ov them critters out ther'll chuck a block under ther wheels. I'm hyar ter help ye out, but we've got ter look sharp or we'll both land in hoc."

As the cautious strains ceased, Buck drew his knife, and with a few careful slashes severed the pinions confining the assayer's arms.

The tightly-knotted thongs had rendered the members temporarily useless. They were cold and stiff.

"Rub 'em up—git the blood started," urged the guide. "Ye may hev' lively use fer 'em afore ye git out ov this den. Ther's a baker's dozen ov outlaws out thar, an' two can't slip out ez easy as one slipped in."

"That's true," assented Mabrey, vigorously chafing his wrists. "But are you sure they are outlaws, Buck?"

The guide's eyes opened wide.

"Sart'in!" he ejaculated. "They've got you, an' they've got ther gals. Ain't thet enough?"

"The girls!" echoed Mabrey, starting. "Do you mean to say, Buck, that we are in the den of the notorious Panther-Head?"

"Edzactly!" Buck asseverated.

The assayer turned pale, and leaned weakly against the wall.

The guide stared at him curiously.

"What is it, boyee?" he ventured, at length.

"You are positive, Buck, that the girls are here?"

"Sure's shootin', they're somewhar in this hyer identical cave."

"And Alton and the teamster—where are they?"

"Not three hundred yards away, keepin' an eye on a parsle ov red-rinds friendly ter Panther-Head."

Mabrey was silent a moment.

"Buck," he exclaimed, abruptly, "I have made a discovery—a startling discovery," and he briefly detailed the circumstances attending his capture.

The guide listened attentively. The nature of Mabrey's revelation was such as to startle him beyond measure.

"Ther condemned reptilian!" he ejaculated. "It begins ter look bad fer ther Hon'abul Madison Morrell, boyee, by Christopher! He's sart'inly in league with these hyer sarpiants."

"If he's not Panther-Head himself," Mabrey suggested, with peculiar emphasis.

"Right ag'in, boyee! Who kin say? But le's go. We've tarried too long now."

The truth of the assertion was at that moment attested. A hasty step sounded in the passage.

With a grimace, Buck drew his knife and moved toward the door.

"Wait," interposed Mabrey, laying a detaining hand upon the guide's arm. "If that is Morrell, we may learn something. This way—quick."

He pointed to a dark cavity in the rear wall of the chamber. It was seven or eight feet above the stone floor, and large enough to admit a man.

"Into that with you," he continued, catching up the lantern and thrusting it into Buck's hand. "Here—I'll give you a boost."

The next minute the guide had vanished, and the underground cell was in total darkness.

Mabrey hastily seated himself upon a boulder, with his hands behind him and his head bowed in the attitude of dejection.

He appeared just as he had at the moment Buck entered the place.

Then the door was slowly opened, and a man with a lantern crossed the threshold.

The new-comer was Madison Morrell.

As he noted the dejected attitude of the captive, he chuckled audibly.

"Aha!" he exclaimed, "I see that you are not exactly delighted, Mr. Mabrey, at the turn affairs have taken."

"There is no very good reason why I should be," returned the assayer, coldly. "And yet, I must confess that out of it all comes a certain sense of satisfaction."

"At what, pray?"

"At having discovered that you are a scoundrel, sir, as base and worthless as treacherous." Morrell laughed roundly.

"You are remarkably astute," he observed, as he put down the lantern and seated himself upon a stone. "I marvel at your having been so easily duped!"

"But, persiflage aside, Mr. Mabrey. I am here to talk business—plain, every-day business, and I want your closest attention."

"You wish to sell me the Horseshoe Mine, I suppose," sneered the assayer.

A grim smile crossed Morrell's face.

"Not exactly that, Mr. Mabrey," he returned. "I am here to disclose the motive leading up to your capture, and to offer you a chance to save your neck. That's the plain English of it all, and if you're willing to listen—"

"Proceed."

"Well, then, to be brief, my name isn't Morrell. I'm from the East, originally, and am descended from an old and aristocratic family, which has for many generations been in possession of a vast estate, entailed in the male line of descent."

"That estate is now the property of Nathan Alton. In the event of his death, it would revert to a distant branch of the family, of which branch I am the sole living representative."

"I see," interjected Mabrey. "You are plotting to slay Alton and obtain possession of the property."

"Your surmise is not wholly correct, my friend. I do not intend to make an attempt against the life of my kinsman. He is older than I by some years, and in due course, barring accident, the estate must fall to me."

"No, no! it is not that I am plotting for. In a word, what I'm after, is the half-million Alton has accumulated since his retirement from the army. The estate will be mine, some day, but with it I must have his ready money—his vast personal property; and to secure this treasure I must make Alice Alton my wife."

"There! do you understand that?"

"Scoundrel! dare you tell—"

"Easy, my friend!" warned the plotter, with an imperious gesture. "Remember that you are helpless here. Remember that life is sweet even to the most miserable of us. You must listen until I am through, and then you will be given due time in which to frame an answer."

"Proceed," uttered Mabrey, wisely checking the threatened outburst.

"That is sensible," observed Morrell, with an approving nod. "Now, the proposition I have to make in the light of the facts just disclosed is this:

"You must release Miss Alton from her engagement to you. You must—"

The remainder of the proposition was never stated, for at that juncture a succession of strange, muffled sounds interrupted Morrell—sounds indicative of a desperate conflict somewhere in the immediate vicinity of the cavern.

chamber, and with an oath he sprung to his feet, and with head bent forward, listened attentively.

The next minute he turned hastily toward the door of the subterranean cell, as if to quit the place.

It was a disastrous move.

With the bound of an enraged panther, Mabrey hurled himself upon his captor, and his sinewy fingers closed upon the fellow's throat so deftly and so tightly as instantly to shut off the power of utterance.

Although terribly surprised and taken at a disadvantage, Morrell struggled gamely, tearing savagely at the deadly clutch upon his throat. But in the extreme terror of the moment, his presence of mind deserted him, and he momentarily forgot the revolver in his girdle, a single shot from which would have relieved him from that choking, vise-like grasp.

Mabrey was desperate. In his haste to secure the cover offered by the opening in the wall, the guide had neglected to provide him with a weapon, and the assayer realized that all depended upon his strength and dexterity, and that failure meant instant death.

With a swift movement he jerked Morrell backward, and tripped him, so that he fell heavily to the floor.

That maneuver virtually decided the contest. Breathless, stunned by the fall, the man from Deadwood proved an easy victim, and in a moment's time was choked into insensibility and disarmed.

Scarcely had this result been attained when Buck appeared at the opening above.

"He came and he saw, but I conquered," said Mabrey, in response to the guide's low whistle of commingled astonishment and exultation.

"I see," returned Buck, with a grin of delight. "Ther king-pin ov ther lay-out, too!—ther Hon'abul Mister Morrell hisself!"

"Exactly! And now, Buck, what next?"

"Fu'st, fasten the door."

Mabrey complied by rolling a heavy boulder against it.

"Now, I'll tell ye, I've bin es busy es you hev," Buck continued. "While ye've bin knockin' one off from ther enemy, I've bin addin' one ter our forces."

"Gropin' down ther passidge hyar ter see ef thar wasn't a way out, I war forced ter roll a consid'abul boulder ter one side, an' I'd no more than h'isted ther stun than it seemed es ef a segment ov ther Old Boy's domain hed bin set loose to one't."

"Mebbe ye heer'd su'thin' ov et, eh?"

Recalling the sounds which had so fortunately thrown Morrell off his guard, Mabrey bowed an assent.

"Wa-al," the guide resumed, "underneath thet boulder war a hole, an' in ther hole, treed by a passel ov Sioux, war a right smart chunk ov a boy. Seein' how matters stood, an' thet ther kid war a goner, onless Providence, in ther shape ov ole Buck Blinkers interfered, I jest reached down an' scooped him out ov thet by ther shoulders, pushed ther boulder back inter place, an' left ther reds ter figurate out ther mystery es best they c'u'd. Et's a queer game, but et's true es gospel, an' hyar's ther lad hisself ter prove it."

The head and shoulders of the rescued lad appeared beside those of the guide.

"Plucky Paul!" cried Mabrey.

"Ther chap from Denver!" the Young Prospector ejaculated, in surprise.

Buck looked from one to the other.

"So ye know each other?" he observed. "I'm t'arnal glad ov et. We'll pull tergether better than ef we war strangers."

"But while ye're confabulatin', I'll slip back an' see ef thar isn't a way out ov this condemned hole."

"Yes, Paul, it is I," said Mabrey, as the guide vanished. "As you see, I was unable to reach Deadwood, as we had planned. I was entrapped on the way there, and brought directly here."

"And Firefly?" interrogated Paul.

"He is now picketed among ther animals."

Mabrey then proceeded to detail his adventures, after which Paul gave a brief account of himself.

The two friends had scarcely finished comparing notes when Buck reappeared.

"Thar's another way out, jest es I s'pected," he announced. "Thet varmint's comin' ter his senses, Mr. Mabrey. Jest hustle him onto his feet, an' we'll yank him outside an' come back arter ther gals."

"Hyar, tie his hands an' gag him, then slip ther rope under his arms an' we'll jerk him out ov thet in a jiffy."

The noosed end of a lariat fell at Mabrey's feet as Buck ceased speaking. The assayer hastened to comply with the request, and the next minute Morrell, despite sundry protestations in the shape of kicking and plunging and vigorous groaning, was drawn aloft.

Mabrey followed, with the lantern.

"Now, foller us," said Buck, taking the lead. "Keep your eyes on Morrell, an' ef he attempts ter give us trouble jab a knife inter him."

Which ferocious threat, in the form of a request, fell with due weight upon the luckless captive.

Some ten or twelve yards beyond the entrance to the passage, the guide turned aside, entering a narrow, tortuous fissure, and a moment later the party found themselves in the open air.

"Hyar we be," announced Buck in a low tone. "We'll tie ther critter's laigs, an' slip back fer ther gals. They're thar, an' mebbe we kin git 'em, mebbe not."

"We shall try, at any rate," Mabrey averred.

The party had halted just within the border of a small grove of dwarfed trees studding a narrow plateau, or terrace. Urging Morrell into the dense shadow of a low, broad-topped pine, they forced him off his feet and finally pinioned his knees and his ankles, after which he was secured to the tree with a stout cord.

The trio then retraced their steps to the cavern-chamber.

Scarcely had their retreating forms vanished one by one into the fissure in the rocks back of the plateau, when the lower branches of the pine shook violently and a lank form dropped to the ground beside the captive Morrell.

Then a lucifer flamed up, and its light disclosed the visage of Old Bill Blaze.

Morrell groaned as loudly as possible. At that moment he felt his hopes reviving.

"All right," muttered Blaze, puffing vigorously at his pipe and shielding the match between his hands as he dropped upon his knees.

"I'll take a look at ye, critter, anyway."

He thrust the tiny flame close to the face of the captive.

"Good Lawd!" he ejaculated, as the match suddenly expired. "It is Basil Bawn!"

Morrell groaned affirmatively, whereupon Blaze removed the gag.

"Now my hands," urged Morrell, in an undertone.

Instead of complying, Blaze uttered a word of warning. Some one was approaching. The next minute a man halted within three paces of the evil pair.

And that man was Nathan Alton!

CHAPTER VIII.

REVELATIONS—SOLID SAMMY'S PROPOSITION.

FOR a full minute Alton stood quite still, with his head inclined, apparently listening, then cautiously moved onward and disappeared in the denser portion of the grove.

In the darkness, Morrell had not recognized the speculator, nor had Alton distinguished the forms of the two men beneath the pine.

"That was a close shave," muttered Morrell. "When he approached, I for a moment believed him one of my men, but a second thought speedily dispelled that idea. This place is strange to me, and I am sure that none of my men know anything of it."

"Now, my good fellow, if you will kindly finish the job you have begun so well, you will find that you have made a paying investment."

"And who are you? Why did you call me by that name?"

"Me?" Blaze ejaculated, with assumed surprise. "Oh, I'm a bum—vag—vagrant, a frontier waif, a castaway, or anything else ye've a mind ter call me, boss; but"—sinking his voice yet lower and craning his head forward—"I've sarved ye afore, an' I reckon I kin now!"

"Served me before?"

"That's w'ot I sed, boss."

"When?"

"'Bout fourteen y'ar' ago, Mr. Basil Bawn!"

"That name again!" exclaimed Morrell, in a tone of angry expostulation. "Don't let me hear it again, please!"

"Now, let me see: I don't remember— Ah! you are Turpin—Bill Turpin?"

"Jes' so, boss," averred Blaze, with a furtive glance into the surrounding shadows. "But don't mention it ag'in, boss. I don't like ther name any better than you do ther han'le I jest called."

"We'll cry quits on that point, then," said Morrell, grimly. "Now get these cussed strings off my wrists and ankles."

"Jest a minnit fu'st, boss! Thet kid's alive an' kickin', an' es tough es a pine-knot. W'ot's he wu'th ter you?"

Morrell started.

"Alive, you say?" he queried, with a startled, anxious air.

"Thet's w'ot I sed, boss," brusquely affirmed the red-bearded desperado.

"You failed, then, to keep our agreement in full?"

"C'udn't be helped, boss," apologetically. "Sarcumstances perwented it."

"He is somewhere near?"

"Whar I kin git at 'im."

"Then finish the job and the \$500 you were to have is yours."

Blaze shrugged his shoulders.

"Hit'll take twice't thet," he declared. "He's a holy terror, ther kid is, an' it'll take a good man ter down 'im—mind thet!"

"I won't pay it."

"Kernel Jim will, an' no blood ter spill. He's hyar in ther hills, too, with an inkling ov ther truth!"

"Ha! you have sold me out!" and Morrell's tones again grew threatening.

"Not I, boss," laughed Blaze. "But murder will out, ye know, an' I s'pose it's bin ther same with this hyar leetle affair. His main object hyar is ter look fer his kid."

"A thousand be it, and the money is yours as soon as you show proof that you have done it."

With a grimly-complacent smile, Blaze then severed the pinions confining Morrell and helped him to his feet.

"Whar shall I meet ye, boss, when it's done?" he ventured.

"In Deadwood—my headquarters. Ask for Madison Morrell. If—"

"But stay! Tell me how you recognized me so readily. I have greatly changed in the past fourteen years."

"I sh'u'd say so!" affirmed Blaze. "But I'm not one ter fergit a face, boss. Then, too, ye've got a peculiar way about ye, an' when I met ye in Deadwood some time ago, though ye didn't look a mite fermiliar fu'st off, yit I thort I'd see'd ye afore, an' so war not long in surmisin' yer identity."

"So!" muttered Morrell, as if not fully satisfied with the explanation. "It is strange Alton—"

Again he checked himself.

"I'm wasting time—I must be off," he exclaimed, the next minute. "You can find me in Deadwood, Bill, 'most any time you inquire for me."

"Did you notice my captors?—did you see which way they went?"

"They disappeared jest thar, boss, at ther back ov this bench—cave entrance thar, I judge. Thar was three ov 'em—too many fer one ter tackle in sich a place. Mebbe I kin help ye?"

"If I thought I could trust you—"

"Ye kin, boss—ye bet ye kin!" earnestly.

"It's rather an experimental way of doing business, but I reckon it can't well be helped," mused Morrell. Then aloud:

"You've been straight so far, Bill, and I'm going to give you a show. Myself and a party of friends have captured two young ladies to hold for ransom. They are in that cave, and those three men intend to rescue them."

"An' ye want ter foil 'em?"

"Exactly. Find the place at which they entered the cave, and take your stand there. Permit no one to come out. I'll go down into the gorge and come in the other way, so that we shall catch these interlopers between two fires and punish them for their meddling. Be wary, now, and cautious. If they appear, shoot them down from ambush."

"K'rect, boss."

With that the hardened desperadoes separated, going in opposite directions.

They were yet visible in the darkness when a short, squat form arose from behind a screen of bushes on the other side of the tree.

The concealed listener was Solid Sammy.

Every word that had passed between the two had been overheard.

"Now hyar's a purty kittle o' fish!" soliloquized the ugly-looking scoundrel, as he gazed sharply in the direction taken by Blaze. "Ther measly houn'! He's hed his leetle trick in view all along, an' never dropped me so much es a hint! Dern him fer a measly cur!"

"But cain't I get my hooks in? I'm onto ther kid racket, an' which one ov us gits our han's enter him fu'st 'll git ther stuff. Ef Morrell kicks on my takin' a hand, mebbe he'll find thar's some red-skins in this kentry w'ot cain't figger ther same way he does."

The renegade chuckled roundly at this conceit, and then prepared to follow Blaze.

At that juncture, however, a cautious step

sounded near at hand, and Sammy silently sunk back into the covert.

"Kin thet be Morrell comin' back?" he muttered, as his keen eyes descried the outlines of the person approaching.

A negative answer speedily suggested itself. The new-comer was a man considerably smaller than Morrell.

"Who kin it be?" was the next query to present itself to the brain of the skulking wretch, and, as before, a definite answer was soon forthcoming.

With a sound akin to a groan, the stranger halted beneath the pine, on the very spot where our three friends, Buck, Mabrey, and Paul had left their captive so securely pinioned.

"Lost!" he exclaimed, in a low, thrilling tone. "Yes, yes, I can no longer conceal the grim truth. It is just as certain that I am lost as it is that I am Nathan Alton!"

"Where is Buck? Where Bill? Or, rather, where am I?"

"Lost! That should be a humiliating confession for me to make, but it is the truth."

"What shall I do?"

The question seemed to be a poser, for with his head bowed low, Alton leaned wearily against the tree, and gave himself up to thought.

"Cuss ther luck!" growled Solid Sammy, mentally. "W'ot shall I do? I don't keer ter run ag'in' thet galoot, and I cain't foller Blaze 'thout 'starbin' his mejitations. Dern it all, sez I!"

The next minute, however, the desperado pricked up his ears, so to speak.

Alton was again communing with himself, in a low, clear tone, audible at a much greater distance than he suspected.

"How can I ever forgive myself for having dragged those two poor girls into this accursed wilderness?" he murmured. "Why could I not have heeded the warning of the past? Was not the sacrifice of one child enough?"

"It is fate—fate!"

"First, my boy, my only son; now my Alice, the light of my old age. My God! can reason withstand two such blows—two such deadly shocks?"

"She must be recovered? Robbed of her, life would lose its charm!" and uttering a groan, the wretched man buried his face in his hands.

"But may not both be found?" he resumed, in a more hopeful tone. "That letter kindles the hope that little Joe yet lives and may be restored to me. If the writer only meets me at the designated point!"

"Poor Dick! This is a sad blow to him and his wife, too. Gertie is their only child, pet—"

A hand fell upon his arm.

"Kernel!"

Alton shrunk back in alarm. So preoccupied had he been that he had not detected the stealthy approach. He peered sharply at the face of the man confronting him, and, drawing his bowie, demanded:

"Your name, sir? Are you friend or enemy?"

"Friend, kernel, an' my name, it is Solid Sammy," was the low-voiced reply.

"Put up yer knife, kernel, ye've nothin' ter fear from me. In fact, I may say thet ye may yit consider this very minnit ther luckiest ov yer life!"

Alton started, and bent a keen glance upon the speaker's brutal visage.

"Pray explain yourself," he requested.

"Sart'in, boss. My name, es I hes sed, is Solid Sammy. I am a mountain detective, an' am hyar in s'arch ov one Bill Turpin, who's bin wanted at Virginia City fer a long time fer murder. I've tracked him up in these hills, an' at this minnit he's not fur away. In fact, I may say thet I was layin' fer him right hyar when ye came up, an' so heerd w'ot ye sed."

"Now, boss, I wants ter ax ye a few questions."

"Proceed," said Alton, visibly interested.

"Hev ye ever answered ter ther hail ov Kernel Jim?"

"I have."

"Did ye ever know a feller by ther name ov Basil Bawn?"

"I did," and Alton started.

"How long sence ye seen him?"

"Fourteen—fifteen years, this month."

"Uh, huh! thet's keepin' wide apart fer kin-folks, ain't et?"

"Perhaps. But proceed."

"W'ud ye know 'im ef ye war ter see 'im ag'in'?"

"I doubt if I would recognize him."

"Thort es much! Now, kernel, does ye know a galoot w'ot calls hisself ther Hon'abul Madison Morrell?"

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"Thort es much! Now, kernel, does ye know a galoot w'ot calls hisself ther Hon'abul Madison Morrell?"

"I know a gentleman of that name. Why—Good heavens! do you mean to intimate that Bawn and Morrell are one?"

"Jest what I asseverate—edzactly!" declared Sammy, emphatically.

For a moment Alton stood quite still, astonished and dismayed.

"Now, kernel, another question," resumed the desperado, "an' arter thet we'll tech on ther financial part ov ther affair."

"Didn't ye lose a son—a leetle feller—some y'ars ago?"

"I did," returned Alton, quickly and tremulously. "He was stolen—kidnapped—from Leavenworth, Kansas, fourteen years ago!"

"I thort all these things from w'ot I heer'd ye say a bit ago," observed Sammy, with grim complacency. "An' jest lately ye got a letter from out hyar, hintin' thet ther youngster was alive, an' so forth, I reckon?"

"And you were the writer?" cried Alton, huskily.

"Not I, boss," and Sammy chuckled grimly. "This identical Bill Turpin I'm arter writ thet letter, es I hes strong reason ter believe."

He's ther man w'ot got away with ther kid from Leavenworth. He war paid ter kill 'im, but held back ter speculate later on. Since he writ thet letter—this very night, in short—he run ag'in' Basil Bawn, recognized him as ther man who had hired him ter slay yer son, an' is now under contract ter finish ther job!"

"Great heavens!" Alton ejaculated, starting back aghast. "Can this be the truth?"

"It's gospel, kernel," asseverated Sammy, with due earnestness. "Bawn is playin' fer a big stake. He'll kill yer son ter secure the entailed estate, an' intends ter marry yer darter ter git his hands on yer ducats."

"You astound me!" groaned Alton, almost crushed in spirit by the desperado's revelations.

Sammy was silent a moment.

"Of course, I expect pay fer all this I've bin a-tellin' ye," he observed, at length. "An' more'n thet, I've got a proposition ter make ye."

"By takin desp'rit risks on my own life, I kin save both ther boyee an' ther gal—pervided ye name a proper figger. What say?"

"Name your own price!" cried Alton, grasping eagerly at the straw thrown in his way.

"Ten thousand?"

"Yes, yes!—twice that amount—anything if you only save them—the two girls and the boy, and baffle that infamous creature!"

"Done, kernel, an' thar's my hand on't!" cried Sammy, fervently. "Now, foller me, an' we'll jump right inter it."

"But wait!—I've a passle ov friends below—red-skins, kernel, but they'll foller whar I lead, an' do w'at I say. I'll call 'em up, an' see w'at we kin do."

And the next instant a peculiar whistle stung sharply through the calm night air.

CHAPTER IX.

PAULS HOWS HIS METTLE.

UPON regaining the aperture in the upper wall of the cavern-chamber, Buck and his companions halted for a moment of consultation. Each felt that the contemplated move was an extremely hazardous one, and that every precaution possible should be taken to prevent a disastrous denouement.

Naturally, Mabrey and Plucky Paul looked to the old guide for counsel. Both had the utmost confidence in his prudence and sagacity, and that that confidence was not misplaced events were yet to prove.

"Boyee," observed the old fellow, as he put down the lantern and leaned against the wall of the tortuous passage, "we now aire come ter ther ticklish part ov ther bizness in hand. Ef eyther one o' ye'd like et better ter be outside, w'y, it ain't too late fer ye ter git up an' everlastingly git. Un'erstan' thet?"

"Nary git!" declared Paul.

"Nor here," Mabrey vowed.

"Thet's good; an' now we come ter ther naixt p'int. Be ye both willin' ter foller my orders—ter do jest es I say?"

Both replied affirmatively.

"Wal, then, you remain hyar, Mabrey, while we go down. It's a leetle rough on ye, ther case bein' es it is, I know, but I kalkilate ye kin do better service hyar, an' hyar ye must stay."

Knowing that there were no appealing this decision, the assayer inclined his head in acquiescence. Nevertheless, he was disappointed.

After a moment of deliberation, Buck lowered the lantern to the rocky floor of the chamber, then slipped the noose of his lariat over a spur

in the side of the passage and carefully descended, followed by Paul.

"Look ter yer we'pons, leetle pard," advised the guide, in a low tone, as he closed the slide of the lantern. "We stand big chances ov git-tin' inter a condemned tight place mighty soon, an' we'd best go loaded fer b'ar."

"Now, gi' me a lift on this stun ag'in' ther door, an' then away we go."

The next minute the two were in the corridor leading down into the main cavern.

In accordance with a pre-arranged plan of action, each closely examined his side of the corridor as he proceeded.

Buck's idea was that the girls were in some out-lying chamber, similar to the one in which Mabrey had been confined.

But the walls of the passage though rough, continued unbroken to the cavern entrance.

"Boyee," uttered the guide, in a hoarse whisper, halting a few paces from the end of the passage; "boyee, we've got ter take our chancies 'ith them outlaws."

"Ye'll obsarve thet ther fire is nigh ther center ov ther cave, an' thet ther gang aire gathered 'round it. Consequently, the borders ov ther place aire in shadow, an' most likely deserted."

"Now, I'll go for'ard an' turn ter ther left. You foller, an' go ter ther right. Keep close to ther wall, an' explore ev're nook an' cranny."

"Ef they diskiver ye, slide straight fer Mabrey. They don't suspect anything yit, but all the same we've got a des'prit game ter play."

With that, Buck glided around the angle formed by the mouth of the fissure, and was at once lost to view.

Waiting only a moment, Paul followed, turning to the right in accordance with the instructions given him.

A glance proved Buck's estimate of the situation correct. Not only were the outlying portions of the cave in darkness, but they seemed wholly deserted.

Pausing in a sheltered niche, Paul proceeded to make a more careful and thorough survey of his strange surroundings.

It required scarcely more than a single sweeping glance at that portion of the cavern visible in the dim firelight to determine that the place had for some time been the rendezvous of Morrell and his men.

Stores and extra accouterments were stacked at regular intervals along the wall, while in the niche in which Paul stood hung a considerable quantity of clothing.

The men themselves were reclining on the dry, sandy floor around the fire, talking and smoking, or playing cards.

They looked for all the world like a group of honest miners, whiling away the evening.

Satisfied with his brief survey, Paul cautiously continued his search, keeping his head against the wall as continuously as possible in anticipation of a fissure leading away into the depths of the rocks.

This careful search was not barren of results.

Not twenty paces had the young prospector taken when he came upon a gap in the irregular wall.

A glance into the circle of firelight showed him that his presence in the cavern was as yet undiscovered, and with a breath of relief he entered the gloomy, forbidding passage.

After a number of abrupt turns it opened into a small sub-cavern, against the rear wall of which hung a lantern.

Upon a bearskin near the center of the open space sat the two captives, Alice Alton and Gertie Spears.

Again had Buck's idea proved to be the correct one.

As Paul espied the two girls, he stopped and raised his hand in token of silence. Just before the lad, seated with his back against the wall, his head bowed low upon his breast, was a burly outlaw.

The fellow was asleep on duty.

For a moment Paul was in a quandary. He knew not just what course to pursue. Then accident decided the matter. In moving forward his foot dislodged a pebble, which rattled sharply over the stones of the passage.

The sleeping sentry started up, rubbing his eyes.

With the spring of a panther, Paul flung himself forward, his left hand closing on the fellow's throat in a deadly clutch, his right wielding a clubbed revolver with merciless energy.

This silent, yet desperate struggle could end in but one way.

Surprised, taken at a terrible disadvantage, the sentinel was quickly brought to his knees, and thence flat upon his back, senseless.

Assuring himself that the fellow was not

shamming, Paul returned the revolver to his girdle, then caught the unconscious outlaw by the shoulders and dragged him into the lighted chamber.

The girls started to their feet.

"Don't be alarmed—he won't molest ye, ladies," said the young prospector, reassuringly, in a cautious undertone.

"Here—let me git them cords off your wrists. I think they'll fit him jest es snugly."

A moment sufficed to transfer the pinions in question from Alice and Gertie to the outlaw. Then with his knife Paul cut a rude but effective gag from one of the bearskins, and then a number of stout thongs with which to secure the fellow's ankles.

When the lad had finished his task, he turned to the girls, who had been watching him as eagerly as anxiously.

"You are Alice Alton an' Gertie Spears?" he asked, with an admiring, yet respectful, glance from one to the other.

"We are," answered Gertie, quickly. "And who are you?" naively.

The Boy Prospector blushed.

"I'm called Paul Park," he replied.

"That is a nice name, and you are a brave boy."

"Thank ye," returned Paul, choking down a lump which had suddenly risen in his throat.

"But I think w'd better git out ov hyar. 'Tisn't jist safe. I've come ter lea l ye ter Mr. Mabrey," addressing Alice.

The girl's eyes kindled brightly.

"Indeed! Then Albion is near?"

"He's not fur away, miss. In fact, he'd 'a' bin hyar in my place ef Buck 'd 'a' let him come."

"Now, foller me jest es close es is ye kin, in single file. Don't make a mite o' noise, nor cry out on no account. We've got ter pass right by a hull passle ov outlaws, an' ef they see or heer us, ye're wuss off than ever."

"Do ye understand?"

Both nodded affirmatively, and Paul at once led the way into the winding passage. The venture was a severe test to the nerves of the beautiful captives; but with the promise of escape to buoy them up, nothing could daunt them.

Arrived at the end of the passage, the trio halted a moment, that Paul might note the positions of the various groups about the fire, then silently filed away toward the chamber in which Albion Mabrey had been imprisoned.

The place was reached in safety, and after a hasty exchange of greetings between the assayer and the girls, the latter were helped into the passage, Paul remaining below until they had ascended.

Ere the lad could begin the tedious ascent, a sudden uproar in the outer cave announced that the escape of the captives had been discovered, or that Buck had been detected.

"Quick, Paul!—quick!" exclaimed Gertie, in alarm. "The outlaws are coming!"

"Go on, Mabrey—git ther girls outside," cried the lad, extinguishing the lantern. "Don't wait for me—I'll git through!"

"No, no!—come on!" urged Mabrey.

No response greeted him. Paul had darted to the door, opened it, and glided out of the chamber.

"Buck's in trouble," thought the lad. "He's a squar' old feller, an' ef I cain't git out I kin at least give him a lift!"

A revolver clutched in each hand ready for instant use, his eyes aglow with the light of battle, the bold boy swiftly retraced his steps to the main cavern.

There an exciting scene was presented to his gaze.

In the midst of his startled followers stood Morrell, his fine clothing in shreds, his face and hands bruised and bleeding, his dark eyes gleaming with wrathful fires.

He was just concluding an impassioned, hoarsely-articulated harangue.

Plucky Paul had just time to comprehend the scene. Then with the suddenness of a thunder-clap the outlaws separated in squads of three and four, and darted away in various directions.

Morrell himself, at the head of four men, bounded directly toward the boy.

"That's ther head devil hisself," muttered the lad, pressing the triggers of his weapons until the hammers were near a poise. "How he escaped I cain't see—nor for that matter kin I see how I'm goin' to do it!"

At that moment it did seem that escape was wholly out of the question. Not only were Morrell and his party advancing directly upon him, but on both sides, at no great distance, were other squads. Then:

"I'm in fer it! I cain't dodge, nor I cain't go back!"

He braced himself for the inevitable struggle. He was cornered, but not cowed. He would fight so long as he could lift an arm.

Nearer and nearer sped Morrell, until scarcely five feet lay between him and the young hero. Then:

"Ha! What's this? Here's one—"

Morrell never got further with his ejaculations announcing a discovery. The slight form standing so defiantly erect there in the darkness launched itself forward. The sound of a heavy blow and a sharp gasp followed the movement, and the outlaw fell backward, carrying down with him one of his followers.

Paul's lowered head had caught him squarely in the midriff, not only knocking him off his feet, but literally "paralyzing" him for the time being.

The three others of the squad readily comprehended just what had happened, and with savage cries sprung forward to slay or capture the bold intruder.

The odds were certainly desperately against the intrepid lad, and yet he possessed one slight advantage.

The three outlaws had just quitted the glowing firelight and were as yet unable to see clearly in the darkness, while themselves in distinct silhouette against the lighted background.

Balancing himself upon one foot, Paul dexterously delivered a kick against the stomach of the foremost, hurling him aside doubled up like a jack-knife, while a brace of snap-shots luckily disposed of the remaining two.

In the mean time, the commotion, brief as it was, had attracted the attention of the other squads, and at the moment the lad's revolvers cracked no less than six of the outlaw clan were advancing upon him.

A hasty glance at his surroundings showed that there was not a breath of time to lose. At best his situation seemed hopeless. With a deep-drawn breath, he bounded directly toward the fire, shouting in as hoarse a voice as he could assume:

"Scatter, pards! scatter! Hyar they come—a hull regiment!"

Fortune favored the daring young prospector.

The startling cry instantly created a momentary panic among the outlaws, and before they could rally Paul had scattered the blazing firebrands in a dozen different directions and was well on his way toward the outlet of the cavern.

Then a voice rung sharply through the darkness:

"Ho there! You are tricked—duped! There is but one—and that one a boy!"

The words were uttered in a deep full tone, thrilling with anger and chagrin. There was not an outlaw within hearing but recognized that voice—not one but dreaded Morrell's wrath.

"Pursue him—kill him!" continued the chief, in the same intense, resonant strains, as he himself leaped forward in pursuit.

His followers were quick to rally. To a man, they instantly darted in the direction taken by the fugitive.

But Paul had secured a good start. He gained the entrance, and dashed out into the canyon. A burly fellow rose up in his pathway with outstretched arms, but a blow from the butt of one of the ready revolvers keeled him over half-senseless.

A dozen swift bounds carried the fugitive into the midst of a number of horses. As if by inspiration, he uttered a peculiar whistle. An answering whinny followed, and the next breath Paul was beside his beautiful filly, Firefly.

Cutting the halter with which the faithful animal was secured, he mounted and turned her head down the canyon.

He was not an instant too soon. Morrell and his men were not a half-score paces distant.

Intuitively, the cunning outlaw divined exactly what had taken place. In swift confirmation of his fears came the clatter of hoofs.

"Fire, boys!—fire, and rake the canyon!" he shouted. "The little devil's—"

"Ha! there he goes! Fire!"

A heavy volley instantly followed the words; but high above the resounding crash of the firearms rose a shrill, elfish cry of defiance, and unscathed by the rain of lead Plucky Paul spurred madly down the canyon.

CHAPTER X.

BACK TO CAMP FROLIC.

"RASH boy!" exclaimed Mabrey, with genuine regret, as his keen ears detected Paul's depar-

ture from the sub-cavern. "He should at least have attempted to make good his escape with us."

"Isn't Mr. Blinker in the cavern?" asked Alice.

"Yes; and I believe that that fact is explanatory not only of the commotion we hear down there, but of Paul's somewhat singular action as well," Mabrey returned, as he prepared to lead the way through the winding passage. "I only fear that both will pay for their intrepidity with their lives."

"Poor, brave boy!" sighed Gertie, and then the trio became silent.

At a point a few feet from the end of the passage Mabrey suddenly paused.

A struggle of some sort was going on just outside, as was attested by the sound of blows, the quick, irregular trampling of feet, and sharp, hard breathing.

As a matter of fact, the combatants were Solid Sammy and Old Bill Blaze.

Immediately after signaling his red allies to ascend to the terrace, the renegade had hastened straight toward the fissure, closely followed by Nathan Alton. At a word from Sammy, Blaze had stepped forth from the covert in which he had secreted himself to await the approach of the escaping captives, and was at once set upon by his treacherous pal.

The struggle was short, for Solid Sammy, while a Hercules in strength, was as agile as a cat, and proved more than a match for the surprised and bewildered desperado of the red beard.

As Blaze sunk down senseless under a sledge-hammer blow, Sammy turned to Alton with the query:

"Shell I knife him, kernel? He's ther galoot w'ot sent ye ther letter, an' ther same one w'ot stole ther kid. Ef ye sez ther word—"

"No, no!" interrupted Alton hastily, laying a restraining hand upon Sammy's arm. "That course is not to be thought of, my man."

"You may bind his wrists and gag him, however, as I wish to interview him later on. Valuable in—"

"Hark! what was that?"

Both men started, and with bended heads listened intently.

"A gun-shot, down in ther cavern," averred Sammy, after a moment. "Kernel, thar's real ole bizness ahead ov us down thar! Dern them lazy reds! why don't they git a move on 'em!"

At that moment, three figures issued from the mouth of the fissure.

"Papa!"

"Mr. Alton!"

Mabrey and Alice uttered the words in a breath. With a start of surprise, almost of consternation, the speculator thrust his head forward to peer through the darkness at the advancing trio, then sprung toward them, crying wildly, incoherently:

"Alice! Gertie!—and you, too, Mabrey! Bless mel Now, may Heaven be thanked! It is as much—it is more than I could have asked!"

In the midst of this joyous outburst, a number of new figures appeared upon the scene, having stolen forward with cat-like stealth from the outer edge of the terrace.

Uttering a few words in the Sioux tongue, Sammy advanced to meet them, and then, after exchanging a few terse sentences with the foremost of the party, returned to the group at the mouth of the fissure.

"Kernel!"

"What is it, my man?"

"My red pards aire hyar. I've 'splained matters, an' they've agreed ter help me through with my compact. Ye kin—"

The roar of a heavy volley a short distance away interrupted the desperado. Then came a shrill yell of defiance, and the sharp clatter of a madly-running horse.

"They're hard at it down thar!" ejaculated Sammy. "Thar's no time ter be lost. Three ov ther red-skins will guide ye back ter yer camp. Ye kin trust 'em. They'll stick by ye, an' act as scouts arter ye git thar. Ye'll find hosses below."

"Back to Camp Frolie?" Mabrey inquired. "There is no one there. Mr. Spears and the ladies are well on the way to Deadwood."

"Ye're mistaken thar, young feller," the desperado returned. "Arter Morrell had captured you, he rode on ter ther camp, an' advised ag'in' ther move ye hed suggested."

Mabrey was silenced, but by no means satisfied. Alton had tersely outlined the state of affairs, and the assayer feared a trap.

"The fellow is a renegade, and has unquestionably been the ally of Morrell up to this mo-

ment," he could not help thinking. "It may be that he has put this scheme afoot to get the game into his own hands."

Nevertheless, were his suspicions well founded, it would be the height of folly to object, just at that juncture, to the arrangement Alton and Sammy had entered upon. They were completely surrounded by the red-skins, and a word from the renegade would precipitate a massacre.

Apparently acquiescent and unsuspecting, Mabrey was in reality keenly alert, watchful for a chance quietly to sever the hazardous connection.

At a word from Solid Sammy, three of the red-skins advanced, two of whom lifted up the limp form of Old Blaze, while the third placed himself in the lead.

Sammy, with the main body of his followers, silently entered the fissure.

"Keep your eye on these fellows," Mabrey whispered to Alton, as they set forward across the terrace. "This arrangement may be a cunning trick on the part of the renegade; or, failing that, now that we are virtually in the power of these red-skins, their natural inclinations may prove stronger than their respect for their white leader."

"I believe that if these red-skins can be depended upon to obey their chief's orders we are safe enough," returned Alton; "but, as you say, their taste for blood-letting may get us into trouble. You are armed?"

"Yes."

"As am I, so we are not altogether helpless. If they contemplate treachery, we shall soon discover it."

The descent from the terrace to the gulch was slow and difficult in the darkness, but was finally accomplished without accident, and a moment later the party, turning an angle in the rocky wall, found themselves within the glow of a camp-fire.

Although there was no one visible, it required no second glance to determine that it was the night camp of Solid Sammy and his braves.

Leaving the fugitives in a shadowy nook, the three red-skins glided away, crossing the lighted space and disappearing in the gloom beyond, whence they speedily returned with a number of horses.

"Let your party mount," said the red guide, addressing Alton. "Time short. Here's gals' horses and saddles. All git back fr'en' camp heap soon now."

True enough; the horses and saddles belonging to Alice and Gertie were among the number.

In another minute the entire party were mounted. Two of the red-skins assumed the lead, while the third fell back to the rear, leading the horse upon which Blaze had been tied. Then came the word, and the strange cavalcade proceeded down the defile at a sharp canter.

After a steady ride of perhaps three hours, the vicinity of Camp Frolic was reached, and a moment later rung out the hail:

"Ho, thar! who comes?"

"That was Jim's voice!" exclaimed Alton, with a long breath of relief. Then:

"Alton and Mabrey, with the girls!"

"God bless you, Nate! Ride up—ride up!" came the voice of Richard Spears, thrilling with joyous excitement.

The red-skins in advance turned aside.

"We ride behind," explained the spokesman of the trio. "White man in camp not know Injun fr'en'—shoot pore Injun putty quick, mebhe."

"That's a good idea, sustained by sound logic," laughed Alton, and then the party rode forward, and dismounted at the entrance of the main tent, where Spears and his wife and Mrs. McMorris were waiting to receive them.

What a joyous, happy reunion it was!

With what fervency and earnestness the entire party returned thanks to Heaven for the mercy shown them!

In the midst of the general rejoicing, Spears suddenly sighted the three red-skins in the background. With a cry of alarm and dismay, he drew his revolver.

Alton promptly grasped his wrist.

"They are friends, Dick," he explained, "But for them we would not now be here. They will remain with us until morning, or later, to guard us against a surprise by Morrell and his cut-throat gang."

"Morrell?" gasped Spears, changing color.

"Morrell!" Mrs. McMorris ejaculated, lifting her hands in genuine horror. "Oh, dear! oh, dear! Did you call Mr. Morrell a—cut-throat, Nate?"

"I did, and he's the meanest kind of a one, too," affirmed the speculator, with considerable

asperity. "He has presented himself to us under false colors, from first to last. Not only is he an outlaw—a desperado of the worst type, but he is my kinsman, Basil Bawn."

"But enough of this, for the present. Our red friends are growing restless, and then, too, they have a captive there whom I desire to interview."

With that, the ladies vanished into the tent, while Alton, with Spears at his side, advanced to the waiting horsemen.

After a brief council, into which Jim, the teamster, was called, Blaze was lifted from his horse and carried into Alton's quarters. The horses were then picketed, and the three Sioux braves went on duty as sentries.

"Come, Albion, I want you to accompany me," said Alton to Mabrey, when all had become quiet. "Dick is with the ladies, but as a further safeguard I'll put Jim on duty near the tent until we are through with this man Blaze."

Together the two took their way to Alton's quarters, and Jim was promptly transferred to sentry duty at the main tent.

Blaze hailed their entrance with a groan. The ruffian was lying flat on his back, bound hand and foot, and gagged. His bloodshot little eyes gleamed hopefully as his gaze rested upon Alton's face.

At a sign from the speculator, Mobrey closed the tent-flap and seated himself upon a camp-stool, revolver in hand.

The significance of the action was not lost upon Blaze. The grim faces of his custodians bespoke deadly earnestness of purpose.

Freeing the captive of his pinions and the gag, Alton assisted him to a seat upon a stool, then sternly confronted him.

"You are Bill Blaze, the man who wrote me this letter?" he grimly interrogated, producing and holding up to view the document in question.

"Bill Blaze, boss," returned the captive, his tongue working stiffly, a sickish sort of smile creeping over his face. "Nice treatment ye're givin' a man who was doin' ye a favor!"

"You are the man, too, who abducted my child from Leavenworth, fourteen years ago?" pursued Alton, his tones growing cold and inflexible.

Blaze shrunk back in dismay.

"Answer!"

"Ef I must—yes! I'm ther identical galoot!"

"You were employed by whom?"

"Basil Bawn."

"You were to kill the boy?"

"That war ther bargain; but I didn't mean ter do anything ov ther kind—nor I didn't boss, so help me! Ye see, ther galoot offered me a big pile; I war a pore cuss—a shiftless critter, an' hard run, an' in course I took ther money—I jest c'u'dn't help it!"

The desperado uttered the words with all the earnestness due his situation.

"Did you not to-night renew your devilish compact with Bawn?" continued Alton, his gray eyes gleaming pitilessly. "Answer me, you soulless wretch! Where is little Joe?—where is the son you stole from me? The truth now, or you shall die!"

Blaze turned ghastly pale. The speculator had moved forward a pace, cocked revolver in hand, and the desperado realized that a crisis of life or death was come.

His tongue was palsied with fear. He attempted to speak, but only a choking, inarticulate sound escaped his lips. He cowered down upon the stool, and glared around as if seeking some avenue of escape.

Then a startling change swept over him. New strength and energy seemed suddenly to have been infused into his lank form. He started to his feet, his eyes glowing redly.

"There!" he cried, in a low, intense voice, pointing to the tent entrance with his long index finger. "There!"

Alton cast a swift, suspicious glance in the direction indicated.

Just within the hut, with uplifted hand, stood Plucky Paul, the Boy Prospector!

CHAPTER XI.

THE CAVERN CAPTIVE.

LET us now turn back and follow the adventures of Buck, the veteran guide.

Like Paul, upon quitting the corridor he had kept close to the shadowy wall of the main cavern until he encountered a fissure leading away into the rock.

A moment's exploration proved it a blind passage, however, and Buck retraced his steps and resumed his examination of the irregular wall.

Just three paces had he taken when he found himself in the jaws of a second opening, which had the appearance of extending far back from the cavern proper.

Bending a keen glance upon the group at the fire to assure himself that their suspicions were as yet unaroused, the guide silently entered the cavity, which proved to be narrow and winding, and in many places so low that he was compelled to stoop.

He had proceeded perhaps twenty feet, when a sharp, metallic sound, not unlike the clanking of chains, caused him to pause and listen.

A moment of silence, and then again came the mysterious noise. It was accompanied with a groan.

"That's jest ahead," muttered Buck, shivering despite his iron nerve. "W'ot or who in tarnation kin et be? Not ther gals, sart'in. I'll hev ter 'vestigate ter find out. Mebbe et's some pore cuss these owdashus outlaws hev chained up fer ter git ransom money."

The next minute it seemed to the guide that his surmise was certainly correct. His extended hands encountered a heavy chain, and then the shoulders of a man.

"My God! who are you?" ejaculated this cavern captive, in a hollow voice, starting up so suddenly as to set his chains to clanking sharply. "In Heaven's name, man—speak! Are you friend or foe?"

Although expecting something of the sort, Buck was startled.

"Hist! not so loud, man!" he cautioned, in a hoarse whisper. "Ye may put me down as a friend. Ye're a captive, I take it. Held fer ransom, or su'thin' ov ther sort, ain't ye?"

"Yes, yes!—a captive in the clutch of this Morrell—this master-devil of the Hills," was the almost incoherent yet earnest reply. "If you've a heart within you, if you've an atom of feeling, strike off these cold and dragging chains and help me to escape from this accursed death-trap. Aid me, and you shall be a rich man. Do you hear?—a rich man!"

"Not so loud!" warned Buck, again. "Thar's not less than a dozen ov Morrell's men within hearin'. I don't want yer money, but I'm goin' ter do w'ot I kin fer ye. Ther fust thing's ter git a look at these hyar flinx's they've put on ye."

The guide softly ignited a match as he spoke. Its flickering light disclosed a startling fact.

The captive was shackled hand and foot, and heavy chains extended from the shackles to iron rings set solidly in the wall.

From these trappings, his gaze wandered to the captive himself.

He saw before him a tall, well-built, dark-eyed man of perhaps forty years, pallid and emaciated from long confinement in the noisome subterranean chamber. His clothing was discolored and rotten, and dark hair and beard were matted and unkempt.

"I don't see just w'ot I kin do at present," the guide observed, as the match expired. "These shackles aire locked, an' will hev to be broken or cut off. Even ef we hed an anvil, a hammer an' a cold chisel, we c'u'dn't work ther trick, fer the noise w'u'd fetch them galoots onto us."

"That is all very true, my friend," returned the captive, in a tone of suppressed excitement. "But fortunately, weshall not have to do violence to these shackles. In his intense malignity, Morrell keeps the key where it is just beyond my reach but in plain view during the hours of daylight. If you will turn back into the passage about three paces and feel along the left wall at the level of a man's head, you will find a bit of greenwood wedged firmly into a crevice. Upon that bit of wood hangs the key."

Buck at once followed the instructions, and the next minute had the key in his grasp.

The captive was quickly relieved of the iron.

"Thank God!" he ejaculated, stretching forth his wasted arms. "I have been kept in this ill-odored place for upward of a month, and hope had died within me. My release just at this juncture seems little short of miraculous. This was to have been my last night, for it was Morrell's purpose to slay me before morning."

"But lead on, lead on, my friend. I am only too anxious to quit this accursed den."

"Aire ye strong enough ter go on?"

"Yes, yes! Though half-starved for weeks, the prospect of a speedy escape gives me new strength. Lead on! I am all impatience."

"Be cautious, then, an' foller me closely. Thar aire other captives in this cave, an' they too must be released as we go."

A moment later, the two glided out into the main chamber, and Buck resumed his search

for Alice and Gertie, the rescued captive following him as noiselessly as a shadow.

The remainder of the wall was solid, and the two men soon found themselves at the cavern entrance.

"Which way now?" breathed the captive, eagerly.

"Back," returned Buck, as cautiously. "Thar's a better way out. Moreover, I've a pard sum'er's in the cave thet I must see afore we leave. Ye may—"

The guide started, and checked the just audible words.

With a quick movement he drew his companion close against the wall. Some one was approaching from without at a run. Just a breath, then a tall form darted into the cavern, and sped directly toward the fire, crying:

"Up, boys, up! The captives are escaping!"

"Thet's Morrell!" uttered Buck, with a grunt of disgust, as he recognized the voice. "Ther Old Boy sart'ly favors his own, else how'd thet reptilian escape?"

For the space of perhaps a minute the guide stood motionless, using his eyes to the best advantage possible. Then a roar of rage rung through the place.

"They're gone!" Morrell yelled, suddenly reappearing, fuming and cursing, from a fissure into which he had vanished. "Scatter! Spread out! and lively, too—they're not far away!"

"Come, pardner—we'll vamoose while thar's room," Buck exclaimed, grasping his companion's arm, and drawing him toward the outlet. "Lordy! ther kid's made quick work ov et!"

The captive needed little urging. The two at once quitted the cavern, and a moment later found themselves among the horses.

Then came the sounds of a desperate struggle within, and for a brief space Buck seemed sorely tempted to turn back, and hazard all in a desperate struggle to save the dashing young prospector.

"No, no!" he muttered. "Ef ther lad hes failed, an' I sh'ud go under, et w'u'd cut off ther last chauce ter rescue ther gals from Morrell's devilish clutches. 'Twon't do ter resk et!"

"Pick a good mount, pardner, an' we'll be off!"

Scarcely had the words passed his lips, however, when a trim figure came bounding down the pass and darted in among the horses. A peculiar whistle, an answering whinny, and then, before either of the two fugitives crouching in the shadow of the wall could realize the exact turn affairs were taking, came a sharp clatter of hoofs, a maddened cry from the outlaw chief, the crash of a volley, and a ringing yell of defiance.

"Dell—Bosart—Locke! mount and pursue that infernal young hoodlum!" ordered Morrell, hoarsely. "Don't quit his trail until you have killed him, if it takes a week!"

The three men called upon instantly sprung forward. Within two minutes they were riding rapidly down the pass.

"Come, boys, we'll see what has become of the girls," continued Morrell, as his desperate trio sprung forward to secure mounts. "They have doubtless quitted the cavern, but if we move lively we shall overtake them before many minutes."

"I hope not!" breathed Buck, as the outlaws moved away. "An' ef Mabrey's got 'em away, I hopes he'll make sech good use ov his time thet ye'll never see ther purty creeters ag'in—by mighty!"

"But, come on, pardner. Ther pass'll be cl'ar fer a minnit or two, an' now's our time ter light."

With what eagerness the escaping captive hastened to comply! How his dark eyes glowed and flashed as he finished adjusting the saddle and rose in the stirrup!

"Aire ye ready?" queried Buck.

"Ready!"

"Then bend low in yer saddle, an'—away we go!"

A yell of alarm, then three or four random shots followed the rattle of flying hoofs along the stony pass. Around a sharp angle sped the fugitives, and the way was clear before them!

Not until they were clear of the canyon and in the shelter of a timbered valley did Buck draw rein. All sounds of pursuit had long since died away.

"My strength is about gone," observed the cavern captive, as they halted in the shadows of a fine grove. "It has been twenty-four hours since food or drink passed my lips, and I'm worn down—played out. I can't keep in the

saddle much longer. You'll have to ride on without me, my friend."

"Never say die, pardner!" encouraged Buck. "My pouch ain't empty—et never is when I'm in a kentry like this, whar a man can't one hour tell how things will be ther naixt. Hyar—while ther hosses breathe a bit, help yerself."

"Thank you!" uttered the captive, briefly but fervently, as he eagerly accepted the proffered food. "Do you know, I believe it was the intention of that devil slowly to starve me to death?"

"Wa-al, make up fer lost time while ther chauce is offered ye," returned Buck, smilingly. "Ye'll need all ther strength ye kin muster up. Thar's a hard ride afore us."

"May I ask your objective point?"

"Deadwood, by way of Camp Frolic."

"Camp Frolic?"

"Yas; it is ther camp ov a party ov Chicago folks an' is in a valley jest beyond these hills ter ther left. Kernel Nate Alton is at ther head ov ther party, an' I am ther guide. Morrell captured—"

"Colonel Nathan Alton, did you say?" interrupted the late captive, with a startled air.

"I did," affirmed Buck, not a little surprised. "Do ye know him?"

"Yes, yes!" was the agitated reply. "But pray proceed, my dear fellow, and then we will away to the camp. Of all men, Nathan Alton is the one I most desire to see. I have done him a grievous wrong, and must make immediate reparation!"

But, before another word could be uttered, a steady volume of sound announced the approach of a cavalcade, and Buck hurriedly dismounted.

The approaching riders could be none other than Morrell and his men, and a whinny from the horses just at that juncture meant capture or death!

CHAPTER XII.

CAPTAIN PANTHER HEAD'S GAME.

NATHAN ALTON'S face flushed and his eyes kindled joyously as his gaze rested upon Plucky Paul.

"Do you mean to tell me that this lad is my boy—my son?" he demanded, turning to Blaze.

"I do—he is, so help me Heaven!" avowed Blaze, eagerly, hopefully. "He's ther very youngster I stole from Leavenworth!"

"Hist!" warned the young prospector, at that juncture, with a wondering glance from one to the other of the tent's occupants. "Be as silent as the grave! *Captain Panther-Head and his men are stealing into the camp!*"

"True, youngster—but you're too late with your intermeddling!" enunciated a cold, hard voice just behind the lad, and at the aperture appeared the strangely-cowled chief of the outlaws!

His weapons covered Alton and Mabrey.

"Raise your hands empty, gentlemen," he continued, with the utmost calmness. "Twenty rifles are leveled at this hut, and even a hint in the direction of resistance shall be your death-warrants!"

The speculator and the assayer turned pale. Whatever might be the state of affairs outside, it was quite certain that the outlaw chief had the drop on them, and they silently complied with his demand.

Paul, too, remained quiet, and made no attempt to draw a weapon.

"My unfortunate friend, you will please arise and disarm the three gentlemen," continued Captain Panther-Head, addressing Blaze. "The tables have been completely turned, and the sooner that fact is duly impressed upon them, the better for all concerned."

Blaze obeyed with alacrity.

"You will now bind their arms," pursued the outlaw chief. "There is a ball of heavy twine in the chest just behind you that will answer admirably."

"You will observe, Mr. Alton, that the knowledge I have gained during my frequent visits to your camp was not acquired without a view to its ultimate usefulness."

Nathan Alton's eyes flushed and his face crimsoned at the taunting strains, but he remained silent.

"Thar—I reckon they won't bother nobody," remarked Blaze, when he had securely pinioned the hands of the last of the trio. "W'ot naixt, capt' in?"

"See that the gentlemen are comfortably seated, and then sit down yourself," Panther-Head returned, with a peculiar smile. "They are friends of mine in whom, under the circum-

stances existing, I place the utmost confidence. And thereby hangs a tale.

"Are you ready to hear it, gentlemen?"

Alton inclined his head.

"As we really have no choice in the matter, you may as well proceed," he observed, bitterly. The outlaw bowed elaborately.

"How complaisant you are, to be sure!" he sneered, deftly removing his grotesque cowl and laying it aside, to fully reveal himself as Madison Morrell. "But I tell you frankly, Colonel Alton, the information I am about to lay before you will be all-sufficient to break your heretofore undaunted spirit."

"Now to business:"

"You have known me as the Hon. Madison Morrell, and you now know me as Captain Panther-Head, the Outlaw Chief; but our acquaintance by no means began in these Hills."

"No, no, colonel! We knew each other even in our boyhood days, for I am none other than your kinsman, Basil Bawn!"

"That admission is not in the nature of a surprise," grimly retorted Alton.

"No? Well, no matter," laughed the outlaw, icily. "You are wonderfully astute, yet you were not shrewd enough to block the desperate game I have played."

"To-night the noble inheritance of Cedar Vale is as good as in my possession; and within a week I shall be the only living representative of the Alton line, and heir not only to the vast entailed estates, but to your personal property as well, for within the next four-and-twenty hours Alice shall become my wife!"

"Ha! *that* causes you to wince, does it? Well, it is laying it on with a vengeance, I must admit! Revenge is the master-motive of it all, however, and the heavier the blows the sweeter my satisfaction. You robbed me of the woman I loved, and in return I have wrested from you your idolized son, your daughter, and finally shall take not only your riches, but life itself!"

"*That* is the game I have played from first to last, and the *denouement* is at hand!"

"Behold in that vagabond of the Hills the miscreant who stole your child! Behold in this ignorant nomad, this frontier dandy, your cherished son!"

His voice ringing with cruel triumph, his face satyr-like in its expression of wicked joy, Morrell pointed from Blaze to Paul.

The red-bearded desperado grinned effusively, as if he enjoyed the affair hugely, but the Boy Prospector sat as if turned to stone.

Alton's head sunk upon his breast and he uttered a low moan.

Mabrey gritted his teeth savagely. Had his hands been free at that moment the brave young assayer would have hazarded all on an attempt to throttle the life out of the unconscionable outlaw.

At that juncture, the flap just behind Morrell was cautiously lifted, and two men stole silently into the tent. Tall, broad-shouldered fellows were they, roughly dressed and heavily armed, and over the face of each hung the folds of a black mask.

Mabrey was the first to notice their presence, and a peculiar gesture on the part of the foremost warned him not to betray them!

Then, all at once, Blaze started slightly, almost imperceptibly, and the hyena-like grin abruptly fled his face. His furtive little eyes, too, had made a discovery. A cocked revolver, grasped by a huge brown hand that seemed as steady as rock, had been leveled straight at his head!

"Such is my vengeance—the vengeance of Basil Bawn!" exultantly continued Captain Panther-Head, after a moment. "It has been slow, but as sure and remorseless as—"

A slim white hand dropped lightly, yet menacingly, upon the shoulder of the redoubtable outlaw, and, as the sentence died upon his lips, he wheeled half around—to find the muzzle of a self-cocking "six" ominously staring him in the face!

"That will do, captain—not another word!" enunciated the foremost of the two intruders, in a cold and steady tone scarcely above a whisper, his dark eyes glittering wickedly, his long white fingers closing upon the outlaw's shoulder with the clutch of steel. "Utter but a sound above a whisper, and I'll scatter your brains to the four winds!"

"Ditto, ye red-headed skunk!" as cautiously uttered the second intruder, slipping past Panther-Head and approaching Blaze. "I've a notion to shove a knife inter yer mis'able carcass anyway, jest fer luck!"

By this time, both Alton and Plucky Paul were fully alive to all that was transpiring, and

with startled, expectant mien they closely watched the varying phases of the strange scene.

Within two minutes, the ball of twine had been brought into use, and so effectively, too, that neither Blaze nor Captain Panther-Head could stir hand or foot.

"Now, a couple of gags," ordered the intruder standing over the outlaw chief, who was visibly the leader of the two. "And see, too, that they fit so closely that they cannot utter so much as a groan."

The order was promptly obeyed.

"And now, gentlemen," pursued the spokesman of the strange pair, turning to Alton and his companions, "you are about to be released. I beg of you, however, that you will not utter a word or make a sound that will go beyond these canvas walls. Captain Panther-Head spoke truthfully when he told you this tent was closely surrounded."

"Your request is certainly most reasonable, sir, and you may depend on us not to alarm the villainous cohort without," promptly responded Alton, in carefully guarded tones, as his pinions fell to the floor.

"But may I ask, sir, to whom we owe our opportune deliverance?"

"Assuredly, sir," was the smiling return. "In fact, I may say that my mission here would be most incomplete and unsatisfactory did I withhold that information," and the speaker removed his mask, disclosing the face of the cavern captive.

"Do you recognize me, sir?"

Alton gazed searchingly at the haggard countenance of his deliverer, then slowly shook his head.

"I do not," he replied, "although there is something strangely familiar about your eyes."

"I do not wonder that you fail to recall my face," remarked the late captive, with a faint sigh. "Yet, I am one who has wronged you deeply."

"I am Basil Bawn!"

Alton started, and his face grew yet whiter.

"Impossible!" he ejaculated, his voice scarcely above a whisper.

"It is nevertheless a fact—I am your kinsman. And that unconscionable wretch—indicating the captive outlaw—" is none other than our old-time schoolmate, Godfrey Tarelton!"

Again Alton started.

"You and he were rivals in love, if you remember," pursued Bawn. "You were the successful suitor, and Tarelton secretly vowed vengeance upon you. His opportunity to strike came even sooner than he had suspected it would."

"You and I quarreled in his presence one day, and that night a mysterious attempt to assassinate me was made. A secret investigation of the affair convinced me that you were the guilty party—wherein I grievously wronged you, as I have but lately discovered. Deeply wounded by your dastardly conduct, as it then seemed to me, I quietly quitted the country, returning but three months ago after an absence of fifteen years."

"Within six weeks after my return, I found myself in Deadwood, and the first man I met was Godfrey Tarelton. He invited me to accompany him out to his mine the next day; I went, and was conducted into an outlaw rendezvous, where I was set upon and knocked senseless, to find myself securely chained in the depths of a cavern when consciousness returned."

"Tarelton was the head of the gang. He unbosomed himself—explained his foul purpose from beginning to end. He had stolen my papers, and intended to assume my name."

"In regard to yourself, he informed me that he had abducted your only son, years ago; that you were now located in Chicago, and that it was his purpose to get you out of the way, and to step into possession of the entailed estates as Bawn. Your arrival in the Hills caused him to modify his plans somewhat, and as the result of it all, he has overreached himself."

"In his bold attempt to rescue the two young ladies to-night, your guide discovered and released me; on our way hither, we were joined by Bill Simmons, one of your teamsters, and later, we surprised and overpowered three of the outlaw cohort, whose masks and apparel we appropriated by way of disguises, as we had reason to suspect that we should find Camp Frolic in the hands of Tarelton, alias Captain Panther-Head."

As Bawn ceased speaking, Nathan Alton moved forward with extended hands, saying:

"I welcome you as one from the grave, Cousin Basil! Thank God! you are alive and here to clear away the doubts and misgivings which have been pressing so deeply into my soul!"

Then with moist eyes and tremulous lips, he turned to Paul and unfolded him in his arms.

"My son—my son!" he murmured, fervently. "You, too, are as one risen from the dead!"

Even as he spoke, Alton brushed back his hair from the young prospector's left temple. There, plainly visible even in the dim light, was a small but vivid crescent-shaped scar.

"It is there—the evidence to dispel every doubt!" continued Alton, with joyous mien.

The expression of satisfaction and delight which swept over Paul's face at this announcement was simply indescribable. His breast rose and fell with the strength of his emotions. His eyes filled, but through the glistening drops shone the light of a great and pure joy.

Before he could utter a word, however, the disguised guide started slightly and raised his hand in warning.

The next instant the flap was lifted, and into the tent strode Solid Sammy!

Buck promptly covered the desperado.

CHAPTER XIII.

A DARING RUSE—CONCLUSION.

THE burly intruder seemed not a whit abashed or alarmed at the menacing reception accorded him. On the contrary, he grinned broadly as he looked from one to another of the group.

"Sort of a family re-union, eh?" he remarked, in a low tone, as he briskly rubbed his hands together. "I sh'd jedge an' asseverate, Kernul Alton, thet from ther looks ov things sar-cumstances hed riz up an' knocked our leetle contract endways!"

"Nearly so, my man," smilingly affirmed the speculator. "But, you may yet be of service to us, if you are willing to strike a bargain."

"Thet's me! Ef thar's an honest penny ter be turned, count on Solid Sammy!"

At that juncture, a peculiar scratching against the tent entrance attracted the alert Buck's attention, and he promptly applied his ear to the edge of the flap.

"Wait—it's a signal from Bill Simmons," explained Bawn.

"An' he says hurry," Buck announced, in almost the same breath. "Ther gang outside aire gittin' restless."

"I fear we have tarried too long!" exclaimed Bawn, hastily resuming his mask. "We must make a decisive move of some kind—and at once."

But, at that juncture, Solid Sammy pushed forward, saying:

"Hol' on! W'ot's et wu'th ter ye, kernel, fer me ter pull ther hull passle ov ye straight an' safe inter Deadwood?"

"If you can do it, name your price, man."

"A thousand, clean cash, with ther tents, wagons, an' camp-fixtures throw'd in."

"Done!" exclaimed Alton, Bawn and Mabrey in a breath.

"Thet's bizness! Now, le's hustle. Hyar, young feller"—catching up the outlaw chief's grotesque cowl and addressing Mabrey—"I don't bear ye no ill-will fer all thet smash in ther cabeza ye guv me this morning. Putt this on an' play ole Painter-Head awhile."

The young assayer instantly understood the ruse and obeyed.

"Now, kernel, mask yerself," pursued the desperado. "Twist a bit ov twine around that kid's han's, es ef they was tied, but so loose thet we kin chuck et off at any minnit. Then keep a stiff upper lip an' wait till ye heer us comin' back, when ye kin git ther pris'ners up, putt out ther light an' march out an' mount 'thout sayin' a word."

"D'ye understand?"

"Perfectly," returned Alton. "I even believe that I catch the idea you propose to put into execution."

"Then b'ar up yer eend, an' we'll win."

With that, the desperado withdrew, closely followed by Mabrey.

No sooner were the two outside of the hut than they found themselves in the midst of a group of impatient outlaws, just beyond whom stood a line of dusky warriors.

Mabrey proved himself equal to the difficult and hazardous part assigned him.

"Have patience, boys!" he exclaimed, the heavy cowl muffling his tones beyond recognition. "Arrangements are about completed. Six of you fetch up fifteen of the horses—four with side-saddles for the ladies, and hold them in waiting here."

"Aren't we all goin' back ter ther Hoss-shoe ter-night?" queried one of the men, in a tone of surprise.

"No, sir!" was the prompt reply. "The unexpected arrival of reinforcements has caused me to amend my plans. There is a quantity of valuable stores here, including several gallons of fine spirits, which it will be impossible to remove to-night. This plunder is too valuable to lose, and from present indications the only way we shall be able to retain possession of it all is to stand guard over it till morning."

The inquisitive fellow retired with a chuckle of satisfaction. Of course, the captain had reference to the arrival of the thieving redskins!

Mabrey and Solid Sammy then hastened toward the main tent.

At the entrance they encountered a sentry.

"Are any of the boys inside?" asked Mabrey, halting.

"No, captain," was the instant response. "Your orders have been rigidly obeyed."

"That is well," and Mabrey passed into the tent, leaving Sammy with the guard.

He was instantly confronted by Richard Spears and the teamster, who promptly covered him with their revolvers, while the ladies started up with ejaculations of alarm.

Lifting the cowl so that his face was revealed, the young assayer said:

"Be quiet, my friends; it is I—Mabrey. Captain Panther-Head's cut-throat clan are in almost absolute possession of the camp, but we have a deep-laid scheme afoot to baffle them. Be wary, now, and cautious."

Then, as the cowl settled back into place, in cold, crisp strains came the words:

"Hands up, please! Not a hostile move, or you are dead men! There—that will do. You are sensible—that I'll swear!"

"Sammy!"

The desperado promptly appeared, dragging by the shoulders the body of the sentry.

"C'u'dn't help et, boss—et jest had ter be did!" he exclaimed, apologetically, as Mabrey started forward. "Ye war a leetle loud in settin' matters straight with yer folks, an' he kitched a word or two, an' got so s'picious thet I hed ter rap him one over ther head. He ain't dead by a jugful, but I'll bet he keeps quiet till we're out ov ther way!"

"You are sure none of the others took alarm?"

"Putty sart'in, boss. But, le's git ter work—we cain't git unner way too quick."

That was Mabrey's idea, too, and in due course the inmates of the tent were gotten ready to filed out with their hands behind them, as if securely pinioned.

A moment later, the party reached the open space between the tents, where the horses were in waiting, and while two of the outlaw clan assisted their pseudo-captain in getting the supposed captives into the saddles, Solid Sammy hastened to Alton's tent, whence he shortly returned, followed by the speculator and his contingent.

In another minute the entire party were mounted, and ready for flight.

"Capt'in, hedn't we better tie ther galoots in the saddle?" queried one of the outlaws.

"No need," returned Mabrey. "If any of them attempts to jump, a little lead will settle the matter for him, as well at one place as another."

"Put out for the rendezvous as soon after daybreak as you can, boys. So-long!"

"So-long, captain, an' good luck ter ye!"

The cavalcade moved forward, and the next minute the fugitives found themselves beyond the camp's confines.

The daring ruse evolved by the cunning Solid Sammy was proving a complete success.

"Do your red friends understand that they are to defend us against pursuit?" anxiously asked Mabrey, of the desperado, as soon as the outlaws were fairly left in the rear.

"They does thet, pardy!" chuckled Sammy.

"Ther three ye had posted fer guards brought me news ov ther lay ov things as soon as Mister Painter-Head entered camp, an' I fixed ther hull job fer ye, then an' thar. Ef—"

A shrill yell in their rear interrupted the desperado.

The cheat had been discovered!

At the same instant, the horse bestrode by Captain Panther-Head swerved out of line, turned, and, with the daring outlaw bending low in the saddle, headed toward the camp at a dead run!

With a fierce curse, Solid Sammy wheeled and dashed away in pursuit, the wild war-cry of the Sioux pealing from his throat.

"Forward!" shouted Mabrey, and closing up, the cavalcade galloped swiftly away in the

darkness, while, in the rear, rung forth the sounds of a desperate hand-to-hand fight! Daybreak found the fugitives in safety in Deadwood.

That midnight battle at Camp Frolic almost totally annihilated not only Captain Panther-Head's road-agent clan, but the party of red-skins as well.

Godfrey Tarelton—"Captain Panther-Head"—and Solid Sammy—"White Wolf, the Decoy"—were found lying side by side, cold and rigid in death, near the entrance of the main tent, in the afternoon of the succeeding day.

Years have passed since the enactment of the stirring scenes recorded in these pages.

Old Blaze, the Hills vagrant, has passed from earth to the bar of eternal judgment. He died in prison.

Buck Blinker, and Jim and Bill are employed on an extensive cattle ranch in Montana. All have been handsomely remembered from time to time by their friend and whilom employer, Colonel Nathan Alton, by whom the rough true hearts swear.

The other characters of our story are all living, and make their homes in Chicago.

Of course, Albion Mabrey and Alice Alton were married, as were Plucky Paul Alton and Miss Gertie Spears, some five years later. In the elegant home of the assayer and his beautiful wife may yet be seen the grotesque cowl once worn by the redoubtable Panther-Head, while Paul and his fair bride treasure highly a choice collection of Black Hills nuggets, which the ex-pro prospector ever declares has been the keystone to all his good fortune.

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